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## STORIES

# Contents



9



14

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### MAKING WAVES

- 4** Kim Mohan

---

### REFLECTIONS

- 5** Robert Silverberg



25

---

### FICTION

- 9** The Rock That Changed Things by Ursula K. Le Guin
- 14** April in Paris by Ursula K. Le Guin
- 20** The Green by Barry B. Longyear
- 25** Deconstruction Gang by Harry Turtledove
- 30** The Price of Civilization by Charles Sheffield
- 45** The Tubes of Baal-Ashteroth by Phillip C. Jennings
- 52** Night Calls by Katharine Eliska Kimbriel
- 75** The Ship Who Searched (Part Four) by Anne McCaffrey  
and Mercedes Lackey



52





20



30

## NONFICTION

- 19** Different Stories With a Lot in Common by Ursula K. Le Guin
- 58** Meteorites and Planet Pieces by Stephen L. Gillett
- 61** About the Authors
- 62** Thus Our Words Unspoken by Barry N. Malzberg
- 71** Tomorrow's Books compiled by Susan C. Stone and Bill Fawcett  
October 1992 releases of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and more
- 110** Back Issues and Anthologies

## LOOKING FORWARD

- 65** The Caterpillar's Question  
by Piers Anthony and Philip José Farmer
- 68** Tyrannosaurus Rex by J. F. Rivkin



Cover Art by Jon Weiman

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# Making Waves

Kim Mohan

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After a little more than a year of doing everything pretty much the same way in one issue after another, we've made a couple of significant changes to the content of AMAZING® Stories in the last two months.

The magazine you're holding contains an essay by Barry N. Malzberg that kicks off a new nonfiction feature in which some of the most accomplished writers in the field will take a few pages of space to talk about whatever's on their minds. Some of the pieces, as Barry's does, will express opinions or observations about the genre; others will be examinations of the work of a particular author; and some of them are liable to be hybrids that accomplish both of those goals at once.

With this series of articles we hope to take the nonfiction section of this magazine to a new level of sophistication, and give you a steady diet of the kind of writing that isn't very frequently published in the other professional science-fiction magazines. Although we aren't doing this expressly for the purpose of rocking the boat, it's practically inevitable that the boat *will* be rocked, because at least some of these writers will be making waves that you'll find hard to ignore.

Barry's essay, entitled "Thus Our Words Unspoken," is a fitting way to start this new feature for at least three reasons. First (and least significant among the three), he is a former editor of this magazine. Second, he has been one of the most outspo-

ken critics of the genre throughout his career. (His book of personal observations on science fiction, *The Engines of the Night*, should be required reading for anyone who's interested in the development and evolution of the genre.) Third, this essay is a prime example of what we hope to accomplish in terms of making you think about science fiction and maybe even shaking you up a bit: a description and discussion of three topics that the author claims will *never* be the central theme of a work of science fiction. Are there subjects that are off limits? Barry Malzberg thinks so, and we think his feelings on that issue are worth at least a few minutes of your time.

In the issues to come we'll be devoting space to other critical essays from (not in order of appearance) Greg Bear, Greg Benford, Michael Bishop, George Alec Effinger, Nancy Kress, Bruce McAllister, James Morrow, Pamela Sargent, Michael Swanwick, Howard Waldrop, Ian Watson, and George Zebrowski—a lineup that doesn't have a weak hitter in it. Stay tuned, and be sure to keep a firm grip on the sides of the boat.

—

The other new feature made its debut last month, and it pretty well speaks for itself, but a few words of explanation might be in order.

"Tomorrow's Books" is designed to be a combination databank and buyer's guide, listing and briefly de-

scribing books in the realm of speculative fiction that are scheduled for release in the month following the cover date of the magazine.

Yes, this is basically the same feature you can find in the two major trade publications, *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle*. But our list is different in a couple of ways:

The other lists are produced way ahead of time, covering several months of publishing activity, and it sometimes happens that in the time between the announcement of a book and its projected release date, the publisher's schedule will change. But because we don't announce a title until a month before it's going to be out, there's virtually no chance that our list will contain any books that get delayed.

The other lists, because they cover so many titles at once, don't go into a lot of detail. But we take the space to give you not only all the essential facts (author, title, publisher, page count, price, etc.) but also a bit of information about the book itself. And we show you a selection of covers, in color, so that in many cases you know exactly what a book<sup>4</sup> looks like before you go out hunting for it.

"Tomorrow's Books" is not meant to make other lists of forthcoming books obsolete; if you want a six-month overview of what's going on, you won't find it here. But we think it accomplishes something no other publication is doing right now—and that's something that both of these new features have in common. ♦

# Reflections

Robert Silverberg

So there I was at sunset, sitting on the terrace of my hotel room outside the medieval town of Siena in Tuscany with a drink in my hand on a lovely May night, waiting to see the green flash, as I have done here and there around the world for the past thirty years.

I'm not talking about a comic-book superhero. (Was there ever a Green Flash? My days of comic-book reading are far behind me. But if there wasn't, there should have been.) No, the green flash of which I speak is a little-known solar phenomenon. I've searched for it over the Grand Canyon, and on the isles of Greece, and looking westward across the Nile at Luxor, and in all manner of other exotic and wonderful places. But never have I had a glimmer of green to reward my quest.

Certainly everything was propitious there in Siena. Our hotel room faced west, looking out on the green Tuscan hills, dark with the spiky columns of cypresses. The air was clear and still. The setting sun hovered in a reddening sky. The drink in my hand was grappa of the finest quality.

"Here it comes," I said to Karen. "Any moment now."

"Call me if you see it," she said.

"But it'll last only a fraction of a second. There won't be time for you to get out here."

"Call me *quickly*," she said. I love her for her skepticism. The sun moved slowly downward behind the lovely hills. The red of the sky deepened. The yellow disk touched the topmost

spire of the hills, and slipped lower until it was half hidden, and then more than half. I was convinced that the flash I had sought so assiduously would surely come at the final moment of visibility, just as the sun went entirely behind the hills: a sudden burst of brilliant emerald, the culmination of my decades-long search.

Another moment—another—

"Here it comes," I said. The sun, yellow to the end, disappeared behind the hills. The sunset colors—the usual gorgeous reds and purples—intensified against the darkening sky.

"Well?" Karen called.

"Nothing," I said. "Just the standard terrific sunset."

"What time would you like to go for dinner?" she asked.

I first heard of the green flash in the waning days of 1959. The January 1960 issue of *Scientific American* had an article about it, richly illustrated with color photographs: the cover of that issue showed a swollen, almost extraterrestrial sun, mainly orange-hued with a band of yellow across its upper limb, generating an eerie burst of green at its very summit.

"Some clear evening as the sun is sinking below the horizon," the article began, "you may, if you are fortunate, witness one of nature's most unusual and beautiful displays. Just as the last of the solar disk is about to disappear, it may momentarily turn a brilliant green."

The author of the piece—D. J. K.

O'Connell, S. J., director of the Vatican Observatory at Castel Gandolfo—had me hooked. I read on in fascination, learning that the green flash is not easy to see from most places, and that some people, having looked for it in vain for years, tend to dismiss it as a fantasy. Even those who have seen it—astronomers and physicists included, Father O'Connell said—often have spoken of it as a mere optical illusion. But here, indeed, were pages and pages of photographs: a series of black-and-white photos first (Father O'Connell understands the ways of faith better than I do) that showed a green flash in several stages of development, and then, for the benefit of skeptics, two stunning color photographs to go with the one on the cover. So much for the astronomers and physicists who thought it was an optical illusion: their eyes might be capable of being fooled, but not the camera's!

The green flash very likely was known to the ancient Egyptians, since it is a common phenomenon in the clear, dry air of their country. A Fifth Dynasty pillar 4500 years old shows the sun as a semicircle colored blue above and green below. And apparently there was an Egyptian belief that the sun turns green during its journey beneath the earth every night.

But I was amused to learn that the first published reference to the green flash seems to be in a science-fiction

(Continued on page 8)

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# Reflections

(Continued from page 5)

novel: Jules Verne's *Le Rayon Vert*, published in 1882, which describes an elaborate search for the enigmatic "ray" of the title. (A French movie of the same name, about ten years ago, told a tale of two young lovers who have read Verne's book and go on a similar quest.) How Verne heard about the "ray," which astronomers now refer to as the "flash," is anybody's guess. Perhaps he saw it himself. Or he may have encountered it in some traveler's memoirs, though no one has located the source.

What modern observers describe is a thin green band that is visible for a flickering instant at or just above the top edge of the sun as it drops below the horizon. Usually it covers about ten seconds of arc—the same apparent width as a one-inch ribbon seen at a distance of 1500 feet—and, Father O'Connell noted, it is not necessarily always green. "Sometimes it is blue, or turns from green to blue," he wrote. "Sometimes it is even violet. On rare occasion it appears while the whole disk of the sun is still above the horizon, and then there may be a red flash at the bottom of the disk as well as a green or blue one at the top." The flash may be seen at sunrise, too, usually green, occasionally blue or violet.

The sunrise flash was described in the authoritative journal *Nature* as far back as 1899 by none other than the great physicist Lord Kelvin, discoverer of the second law of thermodynamics. Kelvin had seen the green sunset flash about 1893, and over the next five or six years often searched for its counterpart of the dawn, finding it finally on a trip to the Alps. "I . . . resolved to watch an hour till sunrise," he reported, "and

was amply rewarded by all the splendors I saw. . . . In an instant I saw a blue light against the sky on the southern profile of Mont Blanc; which, in less than the one twentieth of a second became dazzlingly white."

Despite Kelvin's impressive testimony, many scientists continued to regard the flash as apocryphal folklore, or else as some trick of the eyes. The difficulties photographers had for decades in capturing it on color film added to the general skepticism. ("The real trouble," Father O'Connell tells us, "is simply that the focal length of their camera lens is too short to form a visible image of the narrow band of color. For example, in a 35-millimeter camera with a lens five centimeters in focal length the image of a normal green flash would be only .005 millimeter wide, much too narrow to be recorded on the film.") But with the aid of the Kodak Research Laboratories and a 16-inch Zeiss the scientists at the Vatican Observatory were able to make satisfactory photographs of the green flash in the late 1950's, and thereafter its existence could no longer be doubted.

It is caused by the refracting or bending of the sun's light as it enters the atmosphere. The amount of refraction depends on the wavelength of the light, shorter waves being bent more than longer ones. This produces a spectrum, with the red wavelengths at one end and the violet ones at the other. The lower the sun, the greater the thickness of air through which its light must pass on the way to our eyes, and so the refraction effect is greatest at sunrise and sunset.

If we had exceedingly precise vi-

sion, we would be able to see the colors of the spectrum disappearing in an orderly progression as the sun sets, the red rays going first, then the orange, yellow, green, and so on. In fact too much mingling and scattering of light is going on in the atmosphere at sunset to allow us such a sight. But sometimes, evidently, under perfect viewing conditions, we are given just the quickest glimpse of the green component of the solar spectrum as the sun sinks, green being the color least affected by the atmospheric refraction. In high altitudes, and when the air is very still, even shorter waves may come through in that last moment, and a blue or violet flash is the result.

It must be a remarkable effect, and certainly I long to see it. But, as you know, I've had no luck, despite diligent searching in some of the world's most picturesque places. Egypt, I thought for sure, would provide me with a flash or two—but it didn't.

Perhaps my unfortunate dislike of chilly weather is one problem. The farther you go from the Equator, the more readily visible the flash is. At a place in Norway at latitude 79 degrees north the flash in midsummer may last up to 14 minutes: seven at sunset and seven at the sunrise that follows immediately. And Admiral Byrd, in Antarctica in 1929, reported seeing a green flash at 78 degrees south that endured on and off for 35 minutes.

No trips to McMurdo Sound are on my present travel schedule, nor am I planning to head into the remote Arctic in the immediate future. But I'll keep on looking for the green flash in more temperate places. And if I ever see it, you'll be the first to know. ♦



URSULA K. LE GUIN

The Rock That  
Changed Things

Illustration by Janet Aulisio

A nurobl called Bu, working one day with her crew on the rockpile of Obling College, found the rock that changed things.

Where the obls live, the shores of the river are rocky. Boulders, large stones, small stones, pebbles, and gravel lie piled and scattered for miles up and down the banks. The towns of the obls are built of stone; they hunt the rock-coney for their meat feasts. Their nurobls gather and prepare stonecrop and lichen for ordinary food, and build the houses and the colleges, and keep them neat, for the obls grow nervous and unhappy when things are not kept in order.

The heart of an obl town is its college, and the pride of every college is its terraces, which shelve down towards the river from the high stone buildings. The stones of the terraces are arranged according to size: boulders make the outer walls, and within them are rows of large rocks, then banks of small stones, and at last the inner terraces of pebbles set in elaborate mosaics and patterns in gravel. On the terraces the obls stroll and sit in the long, warm days, smoking ta-leaf in pipes of soapstone, and discussing history, natural history, philosophy, and metaphysics. So long as the rocks are arranged in order of shape and size and the patterns are kept clear and tidy, the obls have peace of mind, and can think deeply. After their conversations on the terraces, the wisest old obls enter the Colleges and write down the best of what was thought and said, in the Books of Record that are kept neatly ranged on the shelves of the College Libraries.

When the river floods in early spring and rises up the terraces, tumbling the rocks about, washing the gravel away, and causing great disorder, the obls stay inside the Colleges. There they read the Books of Record, discuss and annotate, plan new designs for the terraces, eat meat feasts, and smoke. Their nurs cook and serve the feasts and keep the rooms of the Colleges orderly. As soon as the floods pass, the nurs begin to sort the rocks and straighten up the terraces. They hurry to do so, because the disorder left by the floods makes the obls very nervous, and when they are nervous they beat and rape the nurs more harshly than usual.

The spring floods this year had broken through the boulder wall of the town of Obling, leaving branches and driftwood and other litter on the terraces, and disturbing or destroying many of the patterns. The terraces of Obling College are notable for the perfect order and complex beauty of their pebble-patterns. Famous obls have spent years of their lives designing the patterns and choosing the stones; one great designer, Aknegni, is said to have worked with his own hands to perfect his creation. If a single pebble is lost from such a design, the nurobls will spend days hunting through the rock-piles for a replacement of precisely the right shape and size. On such a task the nurobl called Bu was engaged, along with her crew, when she came upon the stone that changed things.

When replacement rocks are needed, the rockpile nurs often make a rough copy of that section of the terrace mosaic, so that they can test pebbles in it for fit without carrying them all the way up to the inner ter-

aces. Bu had placed a trial stone in a test pattern in this fashion, and was gazing at it to be sure the size and shape were exact, when she was struck by a quality of the stone which she had never noticed before: the color. The pebbles of this part of the design were all large ovals, a palm-and-a-quarter wide and a palm-and-a-half long. The rock Bu had just set into the test pattern was a perfect 'quarter-half oval,' and so fit exactly; but while the other rocks were mostly a dark, smooth-grained bluish-grey, the new one was a vivid blue-green, with flecks of paler jade-green.

Bu knew, of course, that the color of a rock is a matter of absolute indifference, an accidental and trivial quality that does not affect the true pattern in any way. All the same, she found herself gazing with peculiar satisfaction at this blue-green stone. Presently she thought, "This stone is beautiful." She was not looking, as she should have been, at the whole design, but at the one stone, whose color was set off by the duller hue of the others. She was strangely moved; strange thoughts arose in her mind. She thought, "This stone is significant. It means. It is a word." She picked it up and held it while studying the test pattern.

The original design, up on the terrace, was called the Dean's Design, for the Dean of the College, Festl, who had planned this section of the terraces. When Bu replaced the blue-green stone in the pattern, it still caught her eye by its color, distracting her mind from the pattern, but she could not see any meaning in it.

She took the blue-green stone to the rockpile fore-nur and asked him if he saw anything wrong, or odd, or particular about the stone. The fore-nur gazed thoughtfully at the stone, but at last opened his eyes wide, meaning no.

Bu took the stone up to the inner terraces and set it into the true pattern. It fitted the Dean's Design exactly; its shape and size were perfect. But, standing back to study the pattern, Bu thought it scarcely seemed to be the Dean's Design at all. It was not that the new stone changed the design; it simply completed a pattern that Bu had never realized was there: a pattern of color, which had little or no relation to the shape-and-size arrangement of the Dean's Design. The new stone completed a spiral of blue-green stones, within the field of interlocked rhomboids of 'quarter-half ovals' that formed the center of Festl's design. Most of the blue-green stones were ones that Bu had laid over the past several years; but the spiral had been begun by some other nur, before Bu was promoted to the Dean's Design.

Just then Dean Festl came strolling out in the spring sunshine, his rusty gun on his shoulder, his pipe in his mouth, happy to see the disorder of the floods being repaired. The Dean was a kind old obl who had never raped Bu, though he often patted her. Bu summoned up her courage, hid her eyes, and said, "Lord Dean, sir! Would the Lord Dean in his knowledge be so good as to tell me the verbal significance of this section of the true pattern which I have just repaired?"

Dean Festl paused, perhaps a touch displeased to be interrupted in his meditations; but seeing the young nur



so modestly crouching and hiding all her eyes, he patted her in a forebearing way and said, "Certainly. This subsection of my design may be read, on the simplest level, as: 'I place stones beautifully,' or 'I place stones in excellent order.' There is an immanent higher-plane postverbal significance, of course, as well as the Ineffable Arcana. But you needn't bother your little head with that!"

"Is it possible," the nur asked in a submissive voice, "to find a meaning in the *colors* of the stones?"

The Dean smiled again and patted her in several places. "Who knows what goes on in the heads of nuns! Color! Meaning in color! Now run along, little nurblit. You've done very pretty repair work here. Very neat, very nice." And he strolled on, puffing on his pipe and enjoying the spring sunshine.

Bu returned to the rockpile to sort stones, but her mind was disturbed. All night she dreamed of the blue-green rock. In the dream the rock spoke, and the rocks about it in the pattern began speaking too. Waking, Bu could not remember the words the stones had said.

The sun was not up yet, but the nurs were; and Bu spoke to several of her nest-mates and work-friends while they fed and cleaned the blits and ate their hurried breakfast of cold fried lichen. "Come up onto the terraces, now, before the obls are up," Bu said. "I want to show you something."

Bu had many friends, and eight or nine nurs followed her up onto the terraces, some of them bringing their nursing or toddling blits along. "What's Bu got in her head this time!" they said to each other, laughing.

"Now look," Bu said when they were all on the part of the inner terrace that Dean Festl had designed. "Look at the patterns. And look at the *colors* of the rocks."

"Colors don't mean anything," said one nur, and another, "Colors aren't part of the patterns, Bu."

"But what if they were?" said Bu. "Just look."

The nurs, being used to silence and obedience, looked.

"Well," said one of them after a while. "Isn't that amazing?"

"Look at that!" said Bu's best friend, Ko. "That spiral of blue-green running all over the Dean's Design! And there's five red hematites around a yellow sandstone—like a flower."

"This whole section in brown basalt—it cuts across the—the real pattern, doesn't it?" said little Ga.

"It makes another pattern. A different pattern," Bu said. "Maybe it makes an immanent pattern of ineffable significance."

"Oh, come off it, Bu," said Ko. "You a Professor or something?"

The others laughed, but Bu was too excited to see that she was funny. "No," she said earnestly, "but look—that blue-green rock, there, the last one in the spiral."

"Serpentine," said Ko.

"Yes, I know. But if the Dean's Design means something—He said that that part means 'I place stones beautifully'—Well, could the blue-green rock be a different word? With a different meaning?"

"What meaning?"

"I don't know. I thought you might know." Bu looked hopefully at Un, an elderly nur who, though he had been lamed in a rockslide in his youth, was so good at fine pattern-maintenance that the obls had let him live.

Un stared at the blue-green stone, and at the curve of blue-green stones, and at last said slowly, "It might say, 'The nur places stones.'"

"What nur?" Ko asked.

"Bu," little Ga said. "She did place the stone."

Bu and Un both opened their eyes wide, to signify no.

"Patterns aren't ever about nuns!" said Ko.

"Maybe patterns made of colors are," said Bu, getting excited and blinking very fast.

"The nur," said Ko, following the blue-green curve with all three eyes, "—'the nur places stones beautifully in uncontrollable loopingness.' My goodness! What's that all about?" He read on along the curve: "—'in uncontrollable loopingness fore'—what's that? Oh, 'fore-shadowing the seen.'"

"The vision," Un suggested. "The vision of . . . I don't know the last word."

"Are you seeing all that in the colors of the rocks?" asked Ga, amazed.

"In the patterns of the colors," Bu replied. "They aren't accidental. Not meaningless. All the time, we have been putting them here in patterns—not just ones the obls design and we execute, but other patterns—nur patterns—with new meanings. Look—look at them!"

Since they were used to silence and obedience, they all stood and looked at the patterns on the inner terraces of the College of Obling. They saw how the arrangement by shape and size of the pebbles and larger stones made regular squares, oblongs, triangles, dodecahedrons, zigzags, and rectilinear designs of great and orderly beauty and significance. And they saw how the arrangement of the stones by color had created other designs, less complete, often merely sketched or hinted—circles, spirals, ovals, and complex curvilinear mazes and labyrinths of great and unpredictable beauty and significance. So a long loop of white quartzites cut right across the quarter-palm straight-edge double line; and the rhomboid section of half-palm sandstones seemed to be an element in a long crescent of pale yellow.

Both patterns were there; did one cancel the other, or was each part of the other? It was difficult to see them both at once, but not impossible.

After a long time little Ga asked, "Did we do all that without even knowing we were doing it?"

"I always looked at the colors of the rocks," Un said in a low voice, looking down.

"So did I," Ko said. "And the grain and texture, too. I started that wiggly part in the Crystal Angles," he went on, pointing at a very ancient and famous section of the terrace, designed by the great Oholothi. "Last year, after the late flood, when we lost so many stones from the design, remember? I got a lot of amethysts from the Ubi Caves. I love purple!" His tone was defiant.

Bu looked at a circle of small, smooth turquoises inlaid in a corner of a set of interlocked rectangles. "I like

blue-green," Bu said in a whisper. "I like blue-green. E likes purple. We see the colors of the stones. We make the pattern. We make the pattern beautifully."

"Should we tell the Professors, do you think?" little Ga asked, getting excited. "They might give us extra food."

Old Un opened his eyes very wide. "Don't breathe a word of this to the Professors! They don't like patterns to change. You know that. It makes them nervous. They might get nervous and punish us."

"We are not afraid," Bu said, in a whisper.

"They wouldn't understand," Ko said. "They don't look at colors. They don't listen to us. And if they did they'd know it was just nurs talking and didn't mean anything. Wouldn't they? But I'm going back to the Caves and get some more amethysts and finish that wiggly part." He pointed to the Crystal Angles, where repairs had scarcely begun. "They'll never even see it."

Ga's naughty little blit, Professor End's son, was digging up pebbles from the Superior Triangle, and had to be spanked. "Oh," Ga sighed, "he's all obblit! I just don't know what to do with him!"

"He'll go to school next year," Un said drily. "They'll know what to do with him."

"But what will I do without him?" said Ga.

The sun was well up in the sky now, and Professors could be seen looking out from their bedroom windows over the terraces. They would not like to see nurs loitering, and small blits were of course absolutely forbidden within the College walls. Bu and the others hastily returned to the nests and workhouses.

Ko went to the Ubi Caves that same day, and Bu went along; they came back with sacks of fine amethysts, and worked for several days completing the wiggly part, which they called the Purple Waves, in the repair and maintenance of the Crystal Angles. Ko was happy in the work, and sang and joked, and at night he and Bu made love. But Bu remained preoccupied. She kept studying the patterns of colors on the terraces, and finding more and more of them, and more and more meanings and ideas in them.

"Are they all about nurs?" old Un asked. His arthritis kept him from the terraces, but Bu reported her findings to him every day.

"No," Bu said, "most of them are about obls and nurs both. And blits, too. But nurs made them. So they're different. Obl patterns are never really about nurs. Only about obls and what obls think. But when you begin to read the colors they say the most interesting things!"

Bu was so excited and persuasive that other nurs of Obling began studying the color patterns, learning how to read their meanings. The practice spread to other nests, and soon to other towns. Before long, nurs all up and down the river were discovering that their terraces, too, were full of wild designs in colored stones, and surprising messages concerning obls, nurs, and blits.

Many nurs, however, upset by the whole idea, steadfastly refused to see patterns in color or to allow that the color of a stone could have any significance at all. "The

obls count on us not to change things," these nurs said. "We are their nurbls. They depend on us to keep their patterns neat, and keep the blits quiet, and maintain order, so that they can do important work. If we start inventing new meanings, changing things, disturbing the patterns, where will it end? It isn't fair to the obls."

Bu, however, would hear none of that; she was full of her discovery. She no longer listed in silence. She spoke. She went among the workhouses, speaking. And one evening, summoning up her courage, and wearing around her neck on a thong a perfect, polished circle of turquoise that she called her selfstone, she went up onto the terraces. She crossed the terraces among the startled Professors, and came to the Rectory Mosaic, where Asti the Rectoress, a famous scholar, strolled in solitary meditation, her ancient rifle slung on her back, wreaths of smoke trailing from her reeking pipe. Not even a Full Professor would have interrupted the Rectoress at such a sacred time. But Bu went straight to her, crouched, covered her eyes, and said in a tremulous but clear voice, "Lady Rectoress, ma'am! Would the Lady Rectoress in her kindness answer a question I have?"

The Rectoress was truly displeased and upset by this disorderly behavior. She turned to the nearest Professor and said, "This nur is insane; have it removed, please."

Bu was sentenced to ten days in jail, to be raped by Students whenever they pleased, and then sent to the flagstone quarries for a hundred days.

When she returned to the nest, she was pregnant from one of the rapes, and quite thin from working in the quarries, but she still wore her turquoise stone. All her nest-mates and work-friends greeted her, singing songs which they had made out of the meanings of the colored patterns on the terraces. Ko comforted her with tender affection that night, and told her that her blit would be his blit, and her nest his nest.

Not many days after, she entered the College (via the kitchens), and made her way (with the assistance of the serving-nurs) to the private room of the Canon.

The Canon of Obling College was a very old obl, renowned for his knowledge of metaphysical linguistics. He woke slowly, mornings. This morning he woke slowly and gazed with some puzzlement at the serving-nur which had come to open his curtains and serve his breakfast. It seemed to be a different one. He almost reached for his gun, but was too sleepy.

"Hullo," he said. "You're new, aren't you?"

"I want you to answer a question I have," said the nur.

The Canon woke further, and stared at this amazing creature. "At least have the decency to cover your eyes, nur!" he said, but he was not really very upset. He was so old that he was no longer quite sure what the patterns were, and so a change in them did not trouble him as much as it might have done.

"Nobody else can answer me," said the nur. "Please do. Do you know if a blue-green stone in a pattern might be a word?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," said the Canon, becoming alert.

"Although, of course, all verbal color-significance is long

obsolete. Of mere antiquarian interest, to old fuddy-duddies such as myself, ha. Hue-words don't occur even in the most archaic patterns. Only in the most ancient Books of Record."

"What does it mean?"

The Canon wondered if he were dreaming—discussing historical linguistics with a nur, before breakfast!—But it was an entertaining dream. "The hue of blue-green—such as that stone you seem to be wearing as an ornament—might, in its adjectival form within a pattern, have indicated a quality of untrammelled volition. As a noun, the color would have functioned to signify, how shall I put it?—an absence of coercion; a lack of control; a condition of self-determination—"

"Freedom," the nur said. "Does it mean freedom?"

"No, my dear," said the Canon. "It did. But it does not."

"Why?"

"Because the word is obsolete," said the Canon, beginning to tire of this inexplicable dialogue. "Now go away like a good nur and tell my servant to bring my breakfast."

"Look out the window," the wild-eyed nur said, in so passionate a voice that the Canon was quite alarmed. "Look out the window at the terraces! Look at the colors of the stones! Look at the patterns the nuns make, the designs we have made, the meanings we have written! Look for the freedom! Oh, please, do look!"

And with that final plea, the amazing apparition vanished. The Canon lay staring at his bedroom door; and in a moment it opened. His old serving-nur came in with his tray of stoncrop tea and smoking hot kippered lichen. "Good morning, Lord Canon, sir!" she said cheerfully. "Awake already? A lovely morning!" And after set-

ting down the tray by his bed, she swept the curtains open wide.

"Was there a young nur in here just now?" the Canon asked, rather nervously.

"Certainly not, sir. At least, not that I know of," said the serving-nur. But she did for a moment glance quite directly, knowingly—did she have the audacity to *look* at him—? Surely not. "Lovely the terraces are this morning," she went on. "Your Canonitude ought to have a look."

"Get out, out," the Canon growled, and the nur left, with a demure curtsy, covering her eyes.

The Canon ate his breakfast in bed, and then got up. He went to the window to look out on the terraces of his College in the morning light.

For a moment he thought he was dreaming again, seeing entirely different patterns than those he had seen all his long life on those terraces—wild designs of curves and colors, amazing phrases, unimagined significances, a wonderful newness of meaning and beauty—and then he opened all his eyes very, very wide, and blinked; and it was gone. The familiar, true order of the terraces lay clear and regular in the morning light. And there was nothing else to see. The Canon turned away from the window and opened a book.

So he did not see the long line of nurobls coming up from the nests and workhouses down below the boulder walls, carrying blits and dancing as they came, dancing and singing across the terraces. He heard the singing, but only as a noise without significance. It was not until the first rock flew through his window that he looked up and cried out in agitation, "What is the meaning of this?" ♦

# April in Paris

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**Ursula K. Le Guin**

Professor Barry Pennywither sat in a cold, shadowy garret and stared at the table in front of him, on which lay a book and a breadcrust. The bread had been his dinner, the book had been his lifework. Both were dry. Dr. Pennywither sighed, and then shivered. Though the lower-floor apartments of the old house were quite elegant, the heat was turned off on April 1st, come what may; it was now April 2nd, and sleeting. If Dr. Pennywither raised his head a little he could see from his window the two square towers of Notre Dame de Paris, vague and soaring in the dusk, almost

Illustration by Jean Elizabeth Martin



near enough to touch: for the Island of St. Louis, where he lived, is like a little barge being towed downstream behind the Island of the City, where Notre Dame stands. But he did not raise his head. He was too cold.

The great towers sank into darkness. Dr. Pennywither sank into gloom. He stared with loathing at his book. It had won him a year in Paris—publish or perish, said the Dean of Faculties, and he had published, and been rewarded with a year's leave from teaching, without pay. Munson College could not afford to pay unteaching teachers. So on his scraped-up savings he had come back to Paris, to live again as a student in a garret, to read fifteenth-century manuscripts at the Library, to see the chestnuts flower along the avenues. But it hadn't worked. He was forty, too old for lonely garrets. The sleet would blight the budding chestnut flowers. And he was sick of his work. Who cared about his theory, the Pennywither Theory, concerning the mysterious disappearance of the poet François Villon in 1463? Nobody. For after all his theory about poor Villon, the greatest juvenile delinquent of all time, was only a theory and could never be proved, not across the gulf of five hundred years. Nothing could be proved. And besides, what did it matter if Villon died on Montfaucon gallows or (as Pennywither thought) in a Lyons brothel on the way to Italy? Nobody cared. Nobody else loved Villon enough. Nobody loved Dr. Pennywither, either, not even Dr. Pennywither. Why should he? An unsocial, unmarried, underpaid pedant, sitting alone in an unheated attic in an unrestored tenement trying to write another unreadable book. "I'm unrealistic," he said aloud with another sigh and another shiver. He got up and took the blanket off his bed, wrapped himself in it, sat down thus bundled at the table, and tried to light a Gauloise Bleue. His lighter snapped vainly. He sighed once more, got up, fetched a can of vile-smelling French lighter fluid, sat down, rewrapped his cocoon, filled the lighter, and snapped it. The fluid had spilled around a good bit. The lighter lit; so did Dr. Pennywither, from the wrists down. "Oh, hell!" he cried, blue flames leaping from his knuckles, and jumped up batting his arms wildly, shouting "Hell!" and raging against Destiny. Nothing ever went right. What was the use? It was then 8:12 on the night of April 2nd, 1961.

A man sat hunched at a table in a cold, high room. Through the window behind him the two square towers of Notre Dame cathedral loomed in the spring dusk. In front of him on the table lay a hunk of cheese and a huge, iron-latched, handwritten book. The book was called (in Latin) *On the Primacy of the Element Fire over the Other Three Elements*. Its author stared at it with loathing. Nearby on a small iron stove a small alembic simmered. Jean Lenoir mechanically inched his chair nearer the stove now and then, for warmth, but his thoughts were on deeper problems. "Hell!" he said finally (in Late Mediaeval French), slammed the book shut, and got up. What if his theory was wrong? What if water were the primal element? How could you prove these things? There must be some way—some method—so

that one could be sure, absolutely sure, of one single fact! But each fact led into others, a monstrous tangle, and the Authorities conflicted, and anyway no one would read his book, not even the wretched pedants at the Sorbonne. They smelled heresy. What was the use? What good this life spent in poverty and alone, when he had learned nothing, merely guessed and theorized? He strode about the garret, raging, and then stood still. "All right!" he said to Destiny. "Very good! You've given me nothing, so I'll take what I want!" He went to one of the stacks of books that covered most of the floor-space, yanked out a bottom volume (scarring the leather and bruising his knuckles when the overlying folios avalanched), slapped it on the table and began to study one page of it. Then, still with a set cold look of rebellion, he got things ready: sulfur, silver, chalk . . . Though the room was dusty and littered, his little workbench was neatly and handily arranged. He was soon ready. Then he paused. "This is ridiculous," he muttered, glancing out the window into the darkness where now one could only guess at the two square towers. A watchman passed below calling out the hour, eight o'clock of a cold clear night. It was so still he could hear the lapping of the Seine. He shrugged, frowned, took up the chalk and drew a neat pentagram on the floor near his table, then took up the book and began to read in a clear but self-conscious voice: "Haere, haere, audi me . . ." It was a long spell, and mostly nonsense. His voice sank. He was bored and embarrassed. He hurried through the last words, shut the book, and then fell backwards against the door, gap-mouthed, staring at the enormous, shapeless figure that stood within the pentagram, lit only by the blue flicker of its waving, fiery claws.

Barry Pennywither finally got control of himself and put out the fire by burying his hands in the folds of the blanket wrapped around him. Unburned but upset, he sat down again. He looked at his book. Then he stared at it. It was no longer thin and grey and titled *The Last Years of Villon: an Investigation of Possibilities*. It was thick and brown and titled *Incantatoria Magna*. On his table? A priceless manuscript dating from 1407 of which the only extant undamaged copy was in the Ambrosian Library in Milan? He looked slowly around. His mouth dropped slowly open. He observed a stove, a chemist's workbench, two or three dozen heaps of unbelievable leatherbound books, the window, the door. His window, his door. But crouching against his door was a little creature, black and shapeless, from which came a dry rattling sound.

Barry Pennywither was not a very brave man, but he was rational. He thought he had lost his mind, and so he said quite steadily, "Are you the Devil?"

The creature shuddered and rattled.

Experimentally, with a glance at invisible Notre Dame, the professor made the sign of the Cross.

At this the creature twitched; not a flinch, a twitch. Then it said something, feebly, but in perfectly good English—no, in perfectly good French—no, in rather odd French: "Mais vous estes de Dieu," it said.

Barry got up and peered at it. "Who are you?" he demanded, and it lifted up a quite human face and answered meekly, "Jehan Lenoir."

"What are you doing in my room?"

There was a pause. Lenoir got up from his knees and stood straight, all five foot two of him. "This is *my* room," he said at last, though very politely.

Barry looked around at the books and alembics.

There was another pause. "Then how did I get here?"

"I brought you."

"Are you a doctor?"

Lenoir nodded, with pride. His whole air had changed. "Yes, I'm a doctor," he said. "Yes, I brought you here. If Nature will yield me no knowledge, then I can conquer Nature herself, I can work a miracle! To the devil with science, then. I was a scientist—" He glared at Barry. "No longer. They call me a fool, a heretic, well by God I'm worse. I'm a sorcerer, a black magician, Jehan the Black! Magic works, does it? Then science is a waste of time. Ha!" he said, but he did not really look triumphant. "I wish it hadn't worked," he said more quietly, pacing up and down between folios.

"So do I," said his guest.

"Who are you?" Lenoir looked up challengingly at Barry, though there was nearly a foot difference in their heights.

"Barry A. Pennywither. I'm a professor of French at Munson College, Indiana, on leave in Paris to pursue my studies of Late Mediaeval Fr—" He stopped. He had just realized what kind of accent Lenoir had. "What year is this? What century? Please, Dr. Lenoir—" The Frenchman looked confused. The meanings of words change, as well as their pronunciations. "Who rules this country?" Barry shouted.

Lenoir gave a shrug, a French shrug (some things never change). "Louis is king," he said. "Louis the Eleventh. The dirty old spider."

They stood staring at each other like wooden Indians for some time. Lenoir spoke first. "Then you're a man?"

"Yes. Look, Lenoir, I think you—you spell—you must have muffed it a bit."

"Evidently," said the alchemist. "Are you French?"

"No."

"Are you English?" Lenoir glared. "Are you a filthy Goddam?"

"No. No. I'm from America. I'm from the—from your future. From the twentieth century A.D." Barry blushed. It sounded silly, and he was a modest man. But he knew this was no illusion. The room he stood in, his room, was new. Not five centuries old. Unswept, but new. And the copy of Albertus Magnus by his knee was new, bound in soft supple calfskin, the gold lettering gleaming. And there stood Lenoir in his black gown, not in costume, at home . . .

"Please, sit down, sir," Lenoir was saying. And he added, with the fine though absent courtesy of the poor scholar, "Are you tired from the journey? I have bread and cheese, if you'll honor me by sharing it."

\* \* \*

They sat at the table munching bread and cheese. At first Lenoir tried to explain why he had tried black magic. "I was fed up," he said. "Fed up! I've slaved in solitude since I was twenty, for what? To learn some of Nature's secrets. They are not to be learned." He drove his knife half an inch into the table, and Barry jumped. Lenoir was a thin little fellow, but evidently a passionate one. It was a fine face, though pale and lean: intelligent, alert, vivid. Barry was reminded of the face of a famous atomic physicist, seen in newspaper pictures up until 1953. Somehow this likeness prompted him to say, "Some are, Lenoir; we've learned a good bit, here and there . . ."

"What?" said the alchemist, skeptical but curious.

"Well, I'm no scientist—"

"Can you make gold?"

"No, I don't think so, but they do make diamonds."

"How?"

"Carbon—coal, you know—under great heat and pressure, I believe. Coal and diamond are both carbon, you know, the same element."

"Element?"

"Now as I say, I'm no—"

"Which is the primal element?" Lenoir shouted, his eyes fiery, the knife poised in his hand.

"There are about a hundred elements," Barry said coldly, hiding his alarm.

Two hours later, having squeezed out of Barry every dribble of the remnants of his college chemistry course, Lenoir rushed out into the night and reappeared shortly with a bottle. "O my master," he cried, "to think I offered you only bread and cheese! It was a pleasant burgundy, vintage 1477, a good year. After they had drunk a glass together Lenoir said, "If somehow I could repay you . . ."

"You can. Do you know the name of the poet François Villon?"

"Yes," Lenoir said with some surprise, "but he wrote only French trash, you know, not in Latin."

"Do you know how or when he died?"

"Oh, yes; hanged at Montfaucon here in '64 or '65, with a crew of no-goods like himself. Why?"

Two hours later the bottle was dry, their throats were dry, and the watchman had called three o'clock of a cold clear morning.

"Jehan, I'm worn out," Barry said. "You'd better send me back." The alchemist was too polite, too grateful, and perhaps also too tired to argue. Barry stood stiffly inside the pentagram, a tall bony figure muffled in a brown blanket, smoking a Gauloise Bleue. "Adieu," Lenoir said sadly. "Au revoir," Barry replied.

Lenoir began to read the spell backwards. The candle flickered, his voice softened. "Me audi, haere, haere," he read, sighed, and looked up. The pentagram was empty. The candle flickered. "But I learned so little!" Lenoir cried out to the empty room. Then he beat the open book with his fists and said, "And a friend like that—a real friend—"

He smoked one of the cigarettes Barry had left him — he had taken to tobacco at once. He slept, sitting at his table, for a couple of hours. When he woke he brooded a while, relit his candle, smoked the other cigarette, then opened the *Incantatoria* and began to read aloud: "Haere, haere . . ."

"Oh, thank God," Barry said, stepping quickly out of the pentagram and grasping Lenoir's hand. "Listen, I got back there—this room, this same room, Jehan! but old, horribly old, and empty, you weren't there—I thought, my God, what have I done? I'd sell my soul to get back there, to him—What can I do with what I've learned? Who'll believe it? How can I prove it? And who the devil could I tell it to anyhow, who cares? I couldn't sleep, I sat and cried for an hour hoping, praying that you would—"

"Will you stay?"

"Yes. Look, I brought these—in case you did invoke me." Sheepishly he exhibited eight packs of Gauloises, several books, and a gold watch. "It might fetch a price," he explained. "I know paper francs wouldn't do much good."

At sight of the printed books Lenoir's eyes gleamed with curiosity, but he stood still. "My friend," he said, "you said you'd sell your soul . . . you know . . . So would I. Yet we haven't. How—after all—how did this happen? That we're both men. No devils. No pacts in blood. Two men who've lived in this room . . ."

"I don't know," said Barry. "We'll think that out later. Can I stay with you, Jehan?"

"Consider this your home," Lenoir said with a gracious gesture around the room, the stacks of books, the alembics, the candle growing pale. Outside the window, grey on grey, rose up the two great towers of Notre Dame. It was the dawn of April 3rd.

After breakfast (breadcrusts and cheese-rinds) they went out and climbed the south tower. The cathedral looked the same as always, though cleaner than in 1961, but the view was rather a shock to Barry. He looked down upon a little town. Two small islands covered with houses; on the right bank more houses crowded inside a fortified wall; on the left bank a few streets twisting around the college; and that was all. Pigeons chortled on the sunwarmed stone between gargoyles. Lenoir, who had seen the view before, was carving the date (in Roman numerals) on a parapet. "Let's celebrate," he said. "Let's go out into the country. I haven't been out of the city for two years. Let's go clear over there"—he pointed to a misty green hill on which a few huts and a windmill were just visible—"to Montmartre, eh? There are some good bars there, I'm told."

Their life soon settled into an easy routine. At first Barry was a little nervous in the crowded streets, but, in a spare black gown of Lenoir's, he was not noticed as outlandish except for his height. He was probably the tallest man in fifteenth-century France. Living standards were low and lice were unavoidable, but Barry had never valued

comfort much; the only thing he really missed was coffee at breakfast. When they had bought a bed and a razor — Barry had forgotten his — and introduced him to the landlord as M. Barrie, a cousin of Lenoir's from the Auvergne, their housekeeping arrangements were complete. Barry's watch brought a tremendous price, four gold pieces, enough to live on for a year. They sold it as a wondrous new timepiece from Illyria, and the buyer, a Court chamberlain looking for a nice present to give the king, looked at the inscription — Hamilton Bros., New Haven, 1881 — and nodded sagely. Unfortunately he was shut up in one of King Louis' cages for naughty courtiers at Tours before he had presented his gift, and the watch may still be there behind some brick in the ruins of Ples-sis; but this did not affect the two scholars. Mornings they wandered about sightseeing the Bastille and the churches, or visiting various minor poets in whom Barry was interested; after lunch they discussed electricity, the atomic theory, physiology, and other matters in which Lenoir was interested, and performed minor chemical and anatomical experiments, usually unsuccessfully; after supper they merely talked. Endless, easy talks that ranged over the centuries but always ended here, in the shadowy room with its window open to the spring night, in their friendship. After two weeks they might have known each other all their lives. They were perfectly happy. They knew they would do nothing with what they had learned from each other. In 1961 how could Barry ever prove his knowledge of old Paris; in 1482 how could Lenoir ever prove the validity of the Scientific Method? They had never really expected to be listened to. They had merely wanted to learn.

So they were happy for the first time in their lives; so happy, in fact, that certain desires, always before subjugated to the desire for knowledge, began to awaken. "I don't suppose," Barry said one night across the table, "that you ever thought much about marrying?"

"Well, no," his friend answered, doubtfully. "That is, I'm in minor orders . . . and it seemed irrelevant . . ."

"And expensive. Besides, in my time, no self-respecting woman would want to share my kind of life. American women are so damned poised and efficient and glamorous, terrifying creatures . . ."

"And women here are little and dark, like beetles, with bad teeth," Lenoir said morosely.

They said no more about women that night. But the next night they did; and the next; and on the next, celebrating the successful dissection of the main nervous system of a pregnant frog, they drank two bottles of Montrachet '74 and got soused. "Let's invoke a woman, Jehan," Barry said in a lascivious bass, grinning like a gargoyle.

"What if I raised a devil this time?"

"Is there really much difference?"

They laughed wildly, and drew a pentagram. "Haere, haere," Lenoir began; when he got the hiccups, Barry took over. He read the last words. There was a rush of cold, marshy-smelling air, and in the pentagram stood a wild-eyed being with long black hair, stark naked, screaming.

"Woman, by God," said Barry.  
"Is it?"

It was. "Here, take my cloak," Barry said, for the poor thing now stood gawping and shivering. He put the cloak over her shoulders. Mechanically she pulled it around her, muttering, "Gratias ago, domine."

"Latin!" Lenoir shouted. "A woman speaking Latin!" It took him longer to get over that shock than it did Bota to get over hers. She was, it seemed, a slave in the household of the Sub-Prefect of North Gaul, who lived on the smaller island of the muddy island-town called Lutetia. She spoke Latin with a thick Celtic brogue, and did not even know who was Emperor in Rome in her day. A real barbarian, Lenoir said with scorn. So she was, an ignorant, taciturn, humble barbarian with tangled hair, white skin, and clear grey eyes. She had been waked from a sound sleep. When they convinced her that she was not dreaming, she evidently assumed that this was some prank of her foreign and all-powerful master the Sub-Prefect, and accepted the situation without further questions. "Am I to serve you, my masters?" she inquired timidly but without sullenness, looking from one to the other.

"Not me," Lenoir growled, and added in French to Barry, "Go on; I'll sleep in the storeroom." He departed.

Bota looked up at Barry. No Gauls, and few Romans, were so magnificently tall; no Gauls and no Romans ever spoke so kindly. "Your lamp (it was a candle, but she had never seen a candle) is nearly burnt out," she said. "Shall I blow it out?"

For an additional two sols a year the landlord let them use the storeroom as a second bedroom, and Lenoir now slept alone again in the main room of the garret. He observed his friend's idyll with a brooding, unjealous interest. The professor and the slave-girl loved each other with delight and tenderness. Their pleasure overlapped Lenoir in waves of protective joy. Bota had led a brutal life, treated always as a woman but never as a human. In one short week she bloomed, she came alive, evincing beneath her gentle passiveness a cheerful, clever nature. "You're turning out a regular Parisienne," he heard Barry accuse her one night (the attic walls were thin). She replied, "If you knew what it is for me not to be always defending myself, always afraid, always alone . . ."

Lenoir sat up on his cot and brooded. About midnight, when all was quiet, he rose and noiselessly prepared the pinches of sulfur and silver, drew the pentagram, and opened the book. Very softly he read the spell. His face was apprehensive.

In the pentagram appeared a small white dog. It cowered and hung its tail, then came shyly forward, sniffed Lenoir's hand, looked up at him with liquid eyes and gave a modest, pleading whine. A lost puppy . . . Lenoir stroked it. It licked his hands and jumped all over him, wild with relief. On its white leather collar was a silver plaque engraved, "Jolie. Dupont, 36 rue de Seine, Paris VIe."

Jolie went to sleep, after gnawing a crust, curled up under Lenoir's chair. And the alchemist cupped the

book again and read, still softly, but this time without self-consciousness, without fear, knowing what would happen.

Emerging from his storeroom-bedroom-honeymoon in the morning, Barry stopped short in the doorway. Lenoir was sitting up in bed, petting a white puppy, and deep in conversation with the person sitting on the foot of the bed, a tall red-haired woman dressed in silver. The puppy barked. Lenoir said, "Good morning!" The woman smiled wondrously.

"Jumping Jesus," Barry muttered (in English). Then he said, "Good morning. When are you from?" The effect was Rita Hayworth, sublimated—Hayworth plus the Mona Lisa, perhaps? "From Altair, about seven thousand years from now," she said, smiling still more wondrously. Her French accent was worse than that of a football-scholarship freshman. "I'm an archaeologist, I was excavating the ruins of Paris III. I'm sorry I speak the language so badly, of course we know it only from inscriptions."

"From Altair? The star? But you're human—I think—" "Our planet was colonized from Earth about four thousand years ago—that is, three thousand years from now." She laughed, most wondrously, and glanced at Lenoir. "Jehan explained it all to me, but I still get confused."

"It was a dangerous thing to try it again, Jehan," Barry accused him. "We've been awfully lucky, you know."

"No," said the Frenchman. "Not lucky."

"But after all it's black magic you're playing with—Listen—I don't know your name, madame."

"Kiskl," she said.

"Listen, Kiskl," Barry said without even a stumble, "your science must be fantastically advanced—is there any magic? Does it exist? Can the laws of Nature really be broken, as we seem to be doing?"

"I've never seen nor heard of an authenticated case of magic."

"Then what goes on?" Barry roared. "Why does that stupid old spell work for Jehan, for us, that one spell, and here, nowhere else, for nobody else, in five—no, eight—no, fifteen thousand years of recorded history? Why? Why? And where did that damn puppy come from?"

"The puppy was lost," Lenoir said, his dark face grave. "Somewhere near this house, on the Isle St-Louis." #

"And I was sorting potsherds," Kiskl said, also gravely, "in a housesite, Island 2, Pit 4, Section D. A lovely spring day, and I hated it. Loathed it. The day, the work, the people around me." Again she looked at the gaunt little alchemist, a long, quiet look. "I tried to explain it to Jehan last night. We have improved the race, you see. We're all very tall, healthy, and beautiful. No fillings in our teeth. All skulls from Early America have fillings in the teeth . . . Some of us are brown, some white, some gold-skinned. But all beautiful, and healthy, and well-adjusted, and aggressive, and successful. Our professions and degrees of success are pre-planned for us in



the State Pre-School Homes. But there's an occasional genetic flaw. Me, for instance. I was trained as an archaeologist because the Teachers saw that I really didn't like people, live people. People bored me. All like me on the outside, all alien to me on the inside. When everything's alike, which place is home . . . But now I've seen an unhygienic room with insufficient heating. Now I've seen a cathedral not in ruins. Now I've met a living man who's shorter than me, with bad teeth and a short tempo. Now I'm home, I'm where I can be myself, I'm no longer alone!"

"Alone," Lenoir said gently to Barry. "Loneliness, eh? Loneliness is the spell, loneliness is stronger . . . Really it doesn't seem unnatural."

Bota was peering round the doorway, her face flushed between the black tangles of her hair. She smiled shyly and said a polite Latin good-morning to the newcomer.

"Kisikl doesn't know Latin," Lenoir said with immense satisfaction. "We must teach Bota some French. French is the language of love, anyway, eh? Come along, let's go out and buy some bread, I'm hungry."

Kisikl hid her silver tunic under the useful and anonymous cloak, while Lenoir pulled on his moth-eaten black gown. Bota combed her hair, while Barry thoughtfully scratched a louse-bite on his neck. Then they set forth to get breakfast. The alchemist and the interstellar archaeologist went first, speaking French; the Gaulish slave and the professor from Indiana followed, speaking Latin, and holding hands. The narrow streets were crowded, bright with sunshine. Above them Notre Dame reared its two square towers against the sky. Beside them the Seine rippled softly. It was April in Paris, and on the banks of the river the chestnuts were in bloom. ♦

## Different Stories With a Lot in Common

Ursula K. Le Guin

These two stories are about as different as they could be, but not because they were written thirty years apart. They're different in their form and energy. The older one is the better written; performed completely inside an existing convention, the fantasy-romance, it can move with security and grace. It plays with the reader's expectations, evading and fulfilling them within the rules of the dance. The recent one is less certain, rawer, because it tries to break and recombine widely different conventions of parable, sf, and satire. Defiantly awkward, it wants to invent its dance. Live and unlearn, I always say.

But both stories are about professors.

I've known a whole lot of professors. Ever since I was born I've known professors. Fortunately, I tend to like professors, even to the point of marrying them. Barry Pennywither is definitely a character made up by a person who likes professors. I think the Canon is, too.

However, even in '62 I was a bit sarcastic about Barry's college, which rewards him for writing a book by not paying him for a year. And the new story uses the university as a paradigm of how Power is constructed, perverted, and perpetuated. Power, in this case, as Meaning. We do entrust Meaning to our universities. "You look after all that stuff," we say, "file it, hang onto it, put it in libraries, teach the students what it all means." And the professor says, "Yes, yes, we will. And if we don't like it, we can say it's meaningless. We can say it's trivial! (1) And we get to use footnotes, too! (1) *Trivial: from the Trivium, the curriculum of the mediaeval European Universities comprising grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and considered as inferior to the greater curriculum, the Quadrivium.*" Exhausted by footnoting, that professor stops, but another one, with a larger salary, goes on enthusiastically: "We can say that some knowledge is important and other

knowledge is contemptible. We can establish hierarchies of value. We can say that only one religion is meaningful, or only the history of one race, or only the literature of one gender, or only the experience of one class. We can assert that we are above politics, and make quite a lot of political hay by doing so. Is control of knowledge a political act? Answer in 4-6 pages. Annotate your sources. Due next Thursday."

Anti-intellectuals hate and fear the colleges because they do offer knowledge, which is freedom. I only get mad at the colleges when they use teaching and learning not as power to, but as power over.

So, far apart as they are, Bu and Barry are both rebels—dreamers looking for a good way, a right way to use the power of knowledge. . . .

# The Green



Barry B. Longyear

I felt myself dropping through  
the darkness, the words of my  
mother still in my veins:

*There are:  
creatures of root and leaf  
creatures of flesh and stench  
creatures filled with slime*

*we are of root and leaf*  
*we are the green*

I struck. My shell cracked but  
did not open. I reached to  
force open the crack, but my  
limbs were not yet full and still  
weak.

*a moment after the fall  
is all*

I forced my fingers against the

Illustration by David Martin

crack until I saw green light entering, filling my tiny chamber. I traced the crack down beneath my legs and then I jumped up and landed upon the crack. I knew this would make the seed move.

*creatures of flesh and stench  
oft have sharp eyes  
those who wing  
the sharpest of all  
motion is death*

I heard the heavy sound of wings beating the air just as the shell beneath my feet gave way, sending me down among the leaves and blades, down among the roots and molds.

There, a creature of slime.

Tubular, segmented, colored with a hot hue. It filled its yawning maw with soil and long-dead creatures of the green now brown, black, and rotted. I readied the thorns on the backs of my hands, soft as they still were, but the creature had no interest in me. I still lived.

I was flattened as a great weight landed above me and a mind-shattering scream filled my hearing. When I could look again, I saw half of the tubular creature writhing among the roots, the slime pulsing pink and yellow from its severed end. Another scream and the huge beak snapped down once more and the creature of slime was no more.

*still  
still  
those who wing in light  
see that which moves  
keep still  
still*

I became as the roots around me: cold, motionless, unthinking, unfeeling, the brown over me like hair. The great beak struck down twice more, the second time turning over a piece of rotted leaf. Finding nothing there, the creature beat its wings and was gone.

Slowly I turned my face up to look through the blades of grass, the moss fronds, ferns, and vines. High above them, her crown almost hidden by everything between us, my mother towered above the world. She had taught me well, for I was still alive to say so. Now there was my duty to her.

*search for the children  
of the fireblades  
black and hard  
thorny with the odor of salt  
heavy*

The fireblades would surround my mother. I found her root, turned my face away from her, positioned the needles of light from above my mother's crown to my left, and began walking through the blades as my thorns hardened. On my journey four times creatures of slime moved to make a meal of me, and four times I left them

in pieces for each other. From the creatures of flesh I hid.

Child, hear this:

When I reached the edge of the world, the place where the fireblades stood their ranks, my head was above the mat of the forest. The upright grasses and ferns still towered over me, but now I was too big to draw the interest of the creatures of slime who crawled. The slime creatures who took to wing, however, now found the spaces between my thorns attractive places to lay their eggs. Twice each cycle of lights I bathed myself in the acid drips of the marabark. It made my skin brown and cracked, but it kept away the egg-layers.

By the time the fireblades turned red and prepared to let fall their children, I was tall enough to see the curve of the fireblade's circle around my mother. Too I could see another like myself preparing to gather the children of the fireblades far toward the morning light.

I crept close to her and said, "Child of our mother."

The other whirled and presented her thorns and shining teeth as she faced me. "My sister," she replied, although she did not relax.

I asked the question of burden. "How many sisters have we?"

"There is one other. She is dead by now. She was slow and stupid."

I held out my upper limbs and cried at this. "Two? There are only two of us? How can only two of us care for the children?"

"We must," answered my sister. "If we fail, our mother dies."

Before we parted we shed our thorny skins, became soft, crept into each other, and embraced. It was a moment that lifted me far above the world into a land of feeling, warmth, and glory. Then we parted, prepared to do what we could to serve the children.

*say to them  
fireblades  
bear me  
I come to care  
for your children  
it is my mother  
you protect*

"There is only you and one other," said a fireblade, its single scarlet leaf pointed toward the sky.

"This is not sufficient," cried another. "Our parents had seven to care for them, yet they complained at how few they were. Our parents' parents had sixteen."

I could not quiet their fears, nor was that my task. Their pods were bursting and I had to gather the children.

*sing this:  
little one hard  
little one dark  
heavy sharp and gloss  
the tree child  
cares for you*

In a bag I plaited with blades of grass I placed the children of the fireblades. When full, the bag was very heavy. I searched my side of the scarlet circle surrounding my mother. In the circle of the fireblades there were thin places filled only with the old and battered. There I clawed the soil. There I placed the children. There I spat the water I gathered and discharged the fertile remains of the things I ate. I waited for the tiny green tips of the children to show themselves above the soil.

My guard was interrupted as a fireblade said, "Your sister is gone! Your sister is gone, the children of the other side with her! There is a break in the wall!"

I shut out the wails of the fireblades until all I could hear were the creatures of flesh and slime within the circle. Crawlers near the tree, fliers buzzing in the light shafts, munchers eating the dead. There was nothing strange.

I crept to the base of my mother's trunk, listened carefully, and began the journey around her. I climbed her small roots, walked around her large ones, jumped the cracks she had made in the boulders her roots had split. All the while I searched and listened for my sister.

With my back to my mother, the first light came now over my right. I stood atop one of my mother's roots and looked into the distance where the circle of fireblades stood. As the fireblades on my side had said, there was a break in the wall. As I approached it, the fireblades on either side wailed, "Tree child, tree child! You must bed the children in the gap. You must, else your mother dies!"

"I have none. All of my children are in the soil. What happened to my sister?"

"Creatures, they came," said another blade. "Strange creatures of flesh and stench: strange flesh; stranger stench. They cut through us here. We called to your sister and she tried to stop them, but they cut her down as well. Your mother they cut with a strange thing. When they left our circle they took the piece of your mother, your sister, and the severed fireblades with them."

"Where did they kill her?" I asked.

"Where you are standing," answered a third.

I stepped back and examined the ground, searching first for the children of the fireblades. Finding none of them, I searched for shreds, a drop of fluid, some part of my sister. I found drops of her fluid gathered in the cup of a leaf. I touched it, felt it, became it, my mind released to enter the being of each cell, the thing of it, the reality of their worlds.

I saw what she had seen. I saw the strange creatures of flesh, smelled their stench. Upright walkers, curious large heads capped with fur and covered with dead plant fibers. The sounds they made were their talk, and my sister had absorbed their talk.

They had approached the wall of fireblades.

"Use the chemproof gloves to touch them. The leaf excretes an acid that can eat through your hand in a second. Look at the burn on my arm from yesterday." The one pulled up a covering and showed a limb to the other. The skin on the limb was light tan save for the burn.

There it was deep red and pale yellow. The one nodded at my mother's crown. "They protect the tree."

"Look at the size of it, Tasha. That trunk must be a hundred meters or more around."

"More, Curt. The flyby put the tops in this stand at just under eight hundred meters."

"Can you find some blown-down branches? If that wood is commercial, we're going to be set for life."

"Nothing on the ground. I'm guessing anything dead that lands down here isn't around very long."

"Look, I want to get to the tree to get a core sample. Let's lose some of these acid plants and make a path."

"I'm pretty sure that'd expose the tree to damage from something outside the ring. Maybe some of those jawed ground-crawlers we picked up yesterday. They're wood eaters."

"It's just one tree, Tasha. On survey we saw hundreds of millions of them."

And they brought out a strange appendage that severed the fireblades at the ground. As the first creature began cutting, the second one watched. My sister turned to fluid, flowed between the blades, and came up behind the two creatures, picking their minds for their terrors. As my sister rose from the fluid, the second creature cried, "Whoa, Jesus!" The creature pulled a thing from its belt, aimed it at my sister, and sent a bolt of cold blue lightning through her. She fell.

"My god! My god, what's that? Curt?" asked the creature with the cutter.

The other bent over my sister's still twitching form. "It looks like a cross between a human and a dragon. Look. Fingers, legs. Human feet, but scales. Look at those bat wings. It's some bizarre kind of gargoye."

The human called Tasha took something from its belt, held it over my sister, and said, "Vegetable fibers. This is a plant."

They both stood in silence for a moment; then the one called Tasha said, "We'll bring it back with us. I bet this is what cares for the acid plants. Keep your piece out just in case there's more of them."

The creature resumed cutting through the wall of fireblades. The image dimmed. The image died. My sister was dead.

The creatures had my sister's body. That meant they had to have the children for the other side of the circle, as well. Already the slime creatures who gnaw were sniffing at the opening in the fireblades. It would only take one of them to bore into my mother and lay its eggs. After that the eggs would hatch and soon the great tree would come crashing down to the forest floor where its remains would soon be devoured.

The gnawing creatures did not cross the stumps of the blades. They still put out their deadly fluid. But soon, no more than a day or two, they would become dry and harmless. I walked through the gap, crushed two of the gnawing creatures, and faced the fireblades.

"Bend across the gap," I told them. "It is all you can do until I return with the children."

It was the only time I had ever ventured beyond the ring of fireblades, but there was no time for wonder. I

searched the ground, the leaves, and branches for signs, absorbed the information they had, and followed.

Mists caressed the tree mosses as I found the two creatures. It was deep into the night, the sounds of the forest hushed. They were in a strange metal shelter. I became as the mist and seeped into the cracks to watch and to listen.

The one called Tasha was reclining beneath sleek coverings of soft metal fibers. The one called Curt was bending over a thing which appeared to make pictures on another thing before him. The picture was of my mother's sign.

"Tasha," the one said. "Wake up and look at this."

"What?" Tasha looked at the picture, her eyes widening. "What a beautiful grain."

"This wood has everything. Beauty, strength, dense cell matrix, but lighter than pine. It cuts like basswood, smells better than cedar, and the tests I've done so far peg it as more rot-resistant than cypress."

"How old is it?"

"I don't know. You'd need a core twenty-five meters long to get near the center. The core I got was only two meters. Anyway, I count around a hundred rings every three centimeters or so. If that ratio holds true throughout the stick . . ." He began poking another thing with one of his fingers.

Before he could finish, Tasha said, "Over eighty thousand years old. That makes it over a hundred thousand on Earth. The oldest living things in the universe."

"Until they discover something older next year."

The strange words were spoken in an excited manner. I needed to know their meanings.

I flowed along the interior surfaces until I reached the place where Tasha reclined. I flowed through the fibers of her coverings and was surprised as she jerked her leg away from where I had touched her. "What's the matter?" asked Curt. "A bug get in your sleeping bag?"

"I don't know. Just a chill. Put the strength tests on the readout."

The picture changed as I pondered the thing she had called "a chill." Some aspect of my touch had been foreign to her senses. I studied motion, and the motion had been less than the billions of beings that inhabited her skin. I studied color, but the creature appeared not to have a sense of vision beneath the covers. She seemed to have no sense of thought touch at all, and, compared to her stench, I had no odor at all. Her leg was warm. I altered my temperature and once more touched her leg. She did not notice and I flowed to the end of Tasha's leg and toward her head and over to her other leg. Soon I filled her. I touched her, felt her, became her, my mind released to enter the being of each cell, the thing of her, the reality of Tasha's world: strange feelings, strange passions, strange purposes, curious goals.

The readout on the screen now meant things to me. The body of my mother, cut into pieces, could endure a variety of forces. Other readouts and the content of Tasha's mind showed the pieces of my mother's body could be exchanged for numbers in a computer, and

that the numbers converted to wealth and survival for Tasha.

Tasha and Curt had taken all of their money, all of the credit they could obtain, and all of the money they could beg from family and friends, to bid for the development claims on a world that had but a number. A morning away was their ship. Elsewhere other humans were testing waters of lakes and seas, collecting biological specimens, and minerals. The reports from all of the teams were incredibly glowing. I could feel what Tasha felt. The golden dawn was within her grasp.

There were a few technical problems, such as how to cut down a tree fifty meters in diameter. Beam cutters could do it, but then how to keep much of the valuable product from shattering as the top of the huge tree struck the ground? Perhaps they would have to lower the trees to the ground with hover mules. Perhaps the wood was strong enough to take the shock of being felled. Nothing mattered. The market for good wood was lucrative enough to justify almost any expenditure.

Tasha closed her eyes and rolled until she was upon her back. She allowed the warmth of success and victory to cuddle her moment. So many had told them they were insane. So many had hidden their own cowardice by calling Curt and Tasha's courage and sense of adventure "immaturity."

"Still thinking about what your uncle said?" Before Tasha could answer, Curt's lips nuzzled her ear. "Screw 'em. Screw the whole chicken parade." He kissed her lips and I became frightened as waves of strange feelings flooded through Tasha. I joined with the feelings, became them, knew them.

"We have won, haven't we, Curt?"

"Are you kidding? With what we and the other teams have turned up? You bet we've won. Right now I could take what little we know and sell our rights for a hundred thousand times the money we put up, and that's nothing compared to what we'll be pulling down in investments, and that's nothing compared to what we'll be producing in three or five years." His hand slipped beneath the covers and cupped one of Tasha's breasts. "God, baby, we are winners. We are goddamned genuine winners."

Later, as Curt entered Tasha, I flowed into him, became him, knew him. The feelings were explosive, but I rode them until the pair at last fell asleep. As mist I flowed from them to a place in the wall where I now knew my sister was being held. I pulled on the handle and peered into the icy depths of the box. Pieces of my sister, still in the strange shape of the gargoyle, were in the box along with many other creatures of root and leaf, flesh and stench, and slime. I searched through them all, a sickness spreading throughout my center; a sickness that confused me. I paused and allowed the feeling to be.

It was pain. It was sadness, loss, anger, loneliness, love destroyed. These were the things Curt and Tasha would have felt had they discovered their own sister sectioned and stuffed into a refrigerator. I put the feelings aside. There was something I needed to do, and I

could not do it if I felt. Besides, the feelings were not mine.

None of the dishes within the box contained the seeds, which meant they still had to be within my sister's body. I poked among the bagged parts until I found a large piece of the torso. I removed it from the box, startled at how cold it was. Its outside had been hardened by the cold. I flowed through the wrapping and searched until I found the pocket of plaited grass deep within her.

She had done well. There were the seeds of many thousands of fireblade children. I gathered them within myself and returned again through the wrapping.

"What in the hell are you?"

I looked toward the humans. Curt was standing naked upon the floor, a beam weapon in his hand. Tasha was sitting up, facing me, a beam weapon in her hand as well.

I allowed the memories of my cells to make my mist into a Tasha, which gave me a voice. "I am a child of my mother," I answered.

Their faces appeared strange. I brought back both Tasha's and Curt's feelings and memories. They were horrified at what they saw. I became Curt, and that horrified them even more. I became both of them and Curt screamed, "Stop it! Stop it, damn you! What are you? What are *you*?" I again became mist.

"I am what I have always been." How else could I answer their frantic questions?

Curt moistened his lips, took a breath, and pointed his weapon at my sister's pieces. "Those belong to us. What were you doing in there?"

"Recovering the children."

"What children?" asked Tasha.

"The children of the fireblades. My sister had them when you killed her. I took them from her body."

Again Curt pointed toward the cold box. "That thing was your sister?"

"Yes." I whirled my mist and looked at the pieces of my sister. She had been too slow. Both of my sisters were dead. They had both been too stupid and too slow. It was the time of changing.

"We're sorry about your sister," said Tasha as my mist thinned and filled the small compartment.

"Hey!" Curt called. Where are you?"

"Where you are," I answered. "I am you, I am Tasha, all of us are for the changing." I dissolved us and flowed from the shelter, the sounds of their screaming vibrating my aura.

\* \* \*

When I reached a place in the forest where I could see my mother's crown, I could see leaves of yellow among the green. Without someone there to guard her and to care for the children of the fireblades, something had gotten through. Already she was dying.

"See?" I said to the humans within me. "See, she dies." I found a clear place upon the forest floor and began scratching the ground to make a new circle. Once the ground was soft, in a ring I planted the children of the fireblades. I stood in the center of the ring and watched the days and nights it took for the children as they broke through the soil, grew, and began to color red.

The humans begged and pleaded, shouted their apologies, made endless promises, and begged some more. It was all there in their memories, however: their plans for my world. Their plans interfered with my purpose. Once the fireblades were thick and strong, my task was to care for my own children. Then, in turn, my children would care for the children of the fireblades.

"Why don't you just kill us?" Tasha screamed. "Kill us! Why don't you kill us?"

I could not kill them. After all, we had loved together, dreamt dreams of riches and power, tasted the sweet sweet taste of victory with each other's tongues. My feet rooted and my limbs spread wide as my small crown of green began its climb toward the top of the forest. There I watched my mother lose her crown and then fall to her rest.

If my children do their tasks well, it will be a long time before I am allowed to rest. I plan to bring the humans into my awareness every thousand years or so to relive those feelings of love, power, and success before I put them away again. I tell you about them, my children, for I cannot keep them in my awareness for very long at a time. Even though I love them dearly, I confess that after the first three hundred years Curt's and Tasha's screaming became quite annoying.

So, children, always remember:

*There are:  
creatures of root and leaf  
creatures of flesh and stench  
creatures filled with slime*

*we are of root and leaf  
we are the green* ♦



# Deconstruction Gang

Harry Turtledove

You have your degree. You are, as the piece of thick, creamy paper they handed you attests, a doctor of philosophy in English with all the rights and privileges thereto pertaining.

You need not have spent years studying literary theory to get to the outside of the text printed on that creamy paper, to understand what those rights and privileges thereto pertaining are: nothing.

You have other pieces of paper, not so thick, not so creamy as your diploma, but textually similar in what they offer: nothing. You know the polite phrases so well: *Thank*



Illustration by Del Harris

*you, for your interest in the assistant professorship at the University, but . . . ; pleased to be in the position of choosing from among such a large number of highly qualified applicants; confident that with your outstanding record you will soon be able to find an appointment elsewhere; due to financial constraints, the Department will not be biring this year.*

Critical theory makes continuity and meaning suspect, but you have trouble interpreting these polite letters as implying anything but *fuck you very much and up yours truly*.

No one wants you.

Along with your degree, you have an apartment, a car, a fiancée whose father suspects academics on general principles, unemployed academics in particular, and most especially the one unemployed academic who happens to be engaged to his one daughter. You also have no health insurance, which seems increasingly insane each day older than thirty you become. You know every possible way to make macaroni and cheese taste like something else. You know none of them works.

You never wanted to be anything but a scholar, to teach other budding scholars the ineffable difference between *différence* and *différance*, to show them that which appears in no text but lurks between the words of all texts. But too many have the same ambition. Too many of them have jobs; none is left for you.

You can't remember when you first thought about looking for work outside the university. That first time, you shook your head in indignation; such an indignity could never befall you. Your checking account was fuller then, your credit cards less overdrawn. Your landlord made no pointed remarks when you walked past her on the way to the laundry room.

After a while, you see your choice clearly: you can go forth and confront the Other, or you can sit tight, watch your savings slip through your fingers until nothing is left . . . and then go forth and confront the Other.

Put that way, it should be obvious. As a matter of fact, it is obvious. You wait a last week even so, hoping a miracle will happen. God must be busy somewhere else. The five dollars you waste on the lottery is just that, waste, and one more rejection letter adds insult to injury.

*Tomorrow*, you tell yourself, but you put it off again till the day after.

The last time you looked for work away from a campus was after your senior year of high school. That's a long time ago now. You wonder how much things have changed—you wonder how much you've changed—since then. You'll find out soon.

When the morning comes, you put on slacks, shirt, tie, the herringbone tweed jacket which irrevocably brands you an academic, the shiny black shoes that always start squeezing your toes after you wear them for fifteen minutes. You throw half a dozen copies of your vita into a manila folder, go downstairs to your car. You hope it starts. It does.

You have your list with you: addresses for three banks, an insurance company, a software outfit that needs someone who can write documentation, and a God-knows-

what called Humanoid Systems, Inc., that needs a technical editor. None of them is what you had in mind when you decided to go into the graduate program. Were it happening to someone else, it might be funny in an existential way.

You soon see you won't get to any of your possibilities very soon. Traffic is a mess; the main street into downtown has one only lane open in each direction. You start, stop, go forward a few more feet, stop again. You watch the temperature needle creep upward and remember the garage man telling you your water pump won't last forever. Neon-orange diamond-shaped signs seem to hang from every street light and telephone pole: RIGHT 2 LANES CLOSED AHEAD alternates with ROAD DECONSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS. You have plenty of time to read them.

You creep forward another couple of blocks. Then, under a DECONSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS sign, you see a different one, a small black-and-white rectangle: ROAD CREW HIRING OFFICE, 2 BLOCKS EAST, complete with an arrow for the directionally challenged.

A nihilistic wind blows through you. If you're out to confront the Other, why not at its most Otherly? Besides, you'll break out of this godawful traffic jam. When you get to the corner, you turn right.

A line snakes toward a house with its front door open. You almost make a U-turn in the middle of the street when you see the people who are standing in that line: pick-and-shovel types, every one of them. You're not desperate enough to want calluses on your hands, not yet. But you've come this far. You may as well find out just who's getting hired. You park your car and walk over to the tail of the line.

With your jacket and tie, you are the Other here. A couple of workbooted musclemen elbow each other in the ribs and point your way. You pretend you don't notice them. They don't hassle you, though, for which you thank the God you can't quite believe in. They need work as badly as you do, and they've been in these lines before: they know they'll get thrown out if they give you a bad time.

The line slithers forward. Men fall into place behind you. Most of the people who come out the front door look glum. A few wear ear-to-ear grins. They've found jobs, so they'll be able to make the next payment on the Harley after all.

You make your slow way up the stairs, across the porch, and into the house. It's as tacky inside as you expected, maybe worse. Till this minute, you never believed anybody would actually frame a print of those poker-playing dogs and hang it in the living room. Again, you almost turn around and leave.

But by now you're only three men away from the hiring boss behind the office-style folding table sitting in the middle of the floor. You watch him, listen to him while he questions the guys ahead of you. He is the Other, all right: hard hat, cigar, beer belly with a black T-shirt stretched obscenely tight across it. On the T-shirt is a skeleton in a football helmet. The legend reads, KICK ASS AND TAKE NAMES.

The hiring boss talks as if he's been chewing rocks for the past couple of hundred years. "Sorry, bud, can't use you," he growls to the man in front of you. The fellow's longshoreman shoulders sag. He turns and shambles out of the house. Now it's your turn.

The hiring boss looks you over. The way he takes in everything at once makes you realize for the first time that, while he might not be educated, he's a long way from stupid. The cigar waggles in his mouth. "Well, well," he says. "What have we here?"

He hasn't seen anything like you in a while, that's for certain. If he sounded scornful, you'd walk away. But he doesn't; he's just honestly curious. Trying to make your voice somewhere near as deep as his, you answer, "I'm looking for work on your deconstruction crew."

"Are you?" He looks you over again, in a different kind of way. "Just so you know, kid, we call it a gang, not a crew." You want to glare; nobody's called you *kid* since you were one. But this fellow holds that greatest of all plums, a job, in the palm of his hand. Besides, if you annoy him, you have no doubt he'll kick your ass around the block now and worry about lawsuits later.

He holds out his hand. You give him a copy of your vita, meanwhile trying to decide which of your original targets you'll save for another day. The bank that's been having trouble with the FDIC over too many bad loans, probably. You say, "I'm a recent Ph.D. from—"

He grunts. It's not a *go on* grunt; it's a *shut up* grunt. He goes through your vita so fast you know he's not really reading it, then tosses it carelessly onto the table in front of him. "I see more bullshit on this job," he remarks to no one in particular. When he looks up at you again, cunning lights his narrow eyes. Around the fat cigar, he says, "Awright, kid, you're so damn smart, tell me something—*quick*, now—about Paul de Man."

For a second you just gape, astounded a dinosaur like this ever heard of de Man. Then you remember he bosses deconstruction crews (no, gangs; you'd like to trace the evolution of that text one day). He'd better have some idea of what his hired help is up to.

He's still watching you; you feel the same almost paralyzing attack of nerves you did in front of the committee for your doctoral exams. As you did then, you fight it down: "One of the things de Man talks about is the figurality that alters the way we perceive what a text means, the mechanism through which any text asserts the opposite of what it appears to say."

The hiring boss's heavy features light up in the sort of smile he'd give if he drew four nines to an ace kicker. "Goddamn! You know what you're talking about!" His handshake crushes your fingers, but you don't dare wince any more than you dared glare before. Then he says the magic words: "When do you want to start?"

You haven't asked about pay yet, or benefits. This was just supposed to be a nihilistic lark. Now all of a sudden it's serious, so you ask. The answers make you blink: better money than any assistant professor's job you've seen advertised, and *much* better bennies. You hear yourself say, "If you really need me, I can be here tomorrow morning."

The hiring boss squashes your hand again. "Kid, you're okay." He turns around, grabs a white hard hat from a pile behind him, reaches up and sticks it on your head. You feel as if you've just been knighted. He says, "Be right here at half past seven. We'll do your paperwork then, and I'll assign you to a gang. See you tomorrow."

Reality starts to set in as you head back to your car. What have you just done to yourself? When you get in, the first thing you do after you fasten your seat belt is take off the hard hat and throw it onto the mat under the glove compartment. Even if you can't find an academic job right now, do you want to work the *roads*?

You look at the manila folder still almost full of vitas, then at your watch. If you hustle, you can still spread your name around today. Then you look at the plastic hard hat. You have a job right there if you want it. What a funny feeling that is!

In the end, you drive back to your apartment instead of downtown. You call up your fiancée. She squeals in your ear when you tell her you found work, then says absolutely nothing after you explain what kind of work it is. You picture her by the phone with her mouth hanging open.

After a long, long pause, she asks, "Are you sure this is what you want to do with your life?" She sounds wary, as if she's wondering what else the you she thinks she knows has managed to hide for the past three and a half years.

"Of course it's not what I want to do with my life. But it's money, and we need that." When you tell her how much money it is, she inhales sharply: she's at least as surprised as you were. You say, "And you know what else?"

"No, what?"

"They gave me my very own hard hat, too."

That does it. You both start cracking up over the phone. She says, "I can't wait to see you in it. Are you going to start hanging out in cowboy bars, too?"

"Jesus, I hope not." If that isn't a fate worse than death, you can't think of one offhand. "Look, honey, if this turns out to be awful, I'll quit, that's all. But the pay is good enough that I ought to see what it's like."

"Okay. Dad'll be glad to hear you've gotten hired." She hesitates a split second too long, then says, "Do you want me to tell him what the job is?"

You can hear she doesn't want to. You can't really blame her, either. "No, you don't need to, not right away. We'll see how it goes."

"Okay," she says again, and yes, she is relieved. But before you can decide whether you're irked about it, she adds, "I love you, honey." In the face of that, irk can wait.

You microwave your favorite frozen entree to celebrate, and wash down the herbed chicken with a glass of cheap white wine. You contemplate a second glass, but virtue triumphs. You're going to have to be sharp tomorrow. No David Letterman tonight, either.

At half past six, the alarm clock goes off right beside your head, like a car bomb when the timer reaches the hour of doom. You shower in a hurry, put on jeans and a T-shirt with the tweed jacket over it, throw a Pop-Tart

into the toaster. You gulp a cup of muddy instant coffee, then head down to your car.

When you pull up in front of the hiring house, you start to get out, then remember the hard hat and plant it on your head. It's not light like a baseball cap. You wonder how your neck will like wearing it all day.

The hiring boss grins when you walk in. "Ha! You did come back. When I take on a guy out of college, I always wonder if he'll show up the next morning. Come here. I'm gonna need your signature about sixty thousand times."

You come. He's just barely kidding—you sign and you sign and you sign. It's a government job, after all. Your formal job title, you learn, is deconstructive analyst. You like it. It won't look half bad on your vita, so long as you're vague about exactly what it entails.

By the time you write your name for the last time, it doesn't look like yours any more. You might as well be signing travelers' checks. "All right," the hiring boss says when you're done. "I'm gonna put you on Crew Four; they've been a man short for a couple weeks now. Here." He points to one of the maps spread out on the table. "They're at 27th and Durant. You hustle, you'll be there by 8:45. Ask for Tony. I'll call him, let him know you're on your way. He'll show you where you need to go." He slaps you on the back. "Good to have you aboard."

You're still a long way from it's sure good to be aboard, but you go back to your car and head for 27th and Durant. The hiring boss knows how traffic works, all right; you get there at 8:43. Fellows in hard hats check you out as you head toward them. You're wearing yours, too, so you may be one of them, but they've never seen you before. You say, "I'm looking for Tony."

"I'm Tony." He's a big black guy, looks like he played defensive end at a medium-good college maybe twenty years ago. His handshake has the gentleness of controlled strength; his smile shows a mouthful of gold. "Hiring boss told me you were coming. Good to have you with us, man. We've been understrength too long. Come on, I'll take you over to the deconstruction gang. Watch where you step."

It's no idle warning. You step over boards and small pieces of pipe and tools, walk around other pieces of pipe almost big enough for you to go through them without stooping. Tony negotiates the chaos as effortlessly as a chamois bouncing up an Alp. He leads you to four men in hard hats sitting on dirt-strewn grass beside a trench that looks as if it escaped from World War I.

"Here's the new fish," Tony says.

They get up, shake your hand, give you their names: Brian, Louis, Pete, and Jerome. You all talk for a few minutes, getting to know one another. It turns out Brian, Louis, and Jerome are refugee academics like you; Brian, whose hair is gray, has been doing this for fifteen years now. You still find that a chilling thought, even if you're part of the gang now, too. Pete, who's almost the size of Tony, picked up deconstruction after he joined the road crew. He's not as smooth as the other three, but listening to him you can tell he knows enough to do the job.

Names flash back and forth through the chitchat: Der-

rida and de Man, Levinas and Bataille, Hegel and Heidegger, Melville and Taylor. You never thought you'd have to raise your voice to make them heard over the pounding roar of jackhammers and the diesel snarl of skiploaders. The world has done a lot of things to you that you never thought of till they happened.

Finally Brian, who's the gang leader, says, "Enough chatter. Time for us to get busy and earn our day's pay."

You sit on the grass with the rest of the deconstruction gang. Everyone is quiet for a while, peering down into the trench. You begin to get a handle on the problem: traffic here has gotten heavier than the roadbed was designed to handle. You can see how things have shifted, how pipes are bent, how this stretch of Durant is going to be nothing but potholes and cracked asphalt unless you do something about it now. A proper deconstruction job when they first built the road would have saved a lot of trouble, but back then they'd never heard of deconstruction. Now you have to worry about fixing the old blunders.

Brian starts out by getting everybody into the proper frame of mind to do what needs doing. He says, "We are the instruments that change the world. Since we are here, we have to understand what's in front of us and act to transform the world and ourselves."

You look admiringly at him: it's good Hegel, translated into language anybody can understand. Listening to Brian, you start to see how someone like Pete can pick up an abstruse skill like deconstruction just by keeping his ears open and thinking about what he hears.

And it's Pete, in fact, who supports Brian and provides the framework for the heavy deconstruction that will follow: "Error isn't fatal, so long as it keeps a grasp on the problem at hand. Even when you say the opposite of what you should be saying, you're still addressing the proper issue."

The proper issue here, of course, is the roadbed, and the error its weakness. Back when it was built, Durant was a residential street. Now it leads to a big shopping district and an industrial park. There are generally more cars around these days, too.

Brian looks at you next. Your stomach knots; it's like the first time you're called on in class. Outside the spoken text, evasive but pervading as Derrida's *différance*, a single thought hangs in the air: *Let's see what the new guy can do.*

You're ready, too. You've been thinking about this ever since you impressed the hiring boss yesterday. Even so, you take a deep breath before you say, "As far as I can see, the best approach to deconstructing this roadbed is to bear in mind that nothing, whether idea or test or roadway, truly happens *in relation to* anything else, before, after, or contemporary. Things *do not* relate to one another; they just *are*. We have to reintegrate the things that are to suit our purposes, not those of the original road builders."

Silence for a few seconds. Then Brian reaches out with a closed fist and lightly taps you on your denim-covered knee. You grin. You've passed the test. Better—you've aced it.

From then on, the work flows smoothly. Your English professors always insisted deconstruction is a universally valid technique. In your undergrad days, you found historians using deconstructive concepts like demystification and privileged ideas. Now you truly involve yourself in the broader application of the technology.

From the framework Brian, Peter, and you have set up, the gang goes on as you thought it would, analyzing the textuality of the roadbed, considering all the implications of the opposition roadway/traveler.

In the old days, they would have been inextricably linked. Travelers went where and how the roadway allowed, and that was that. It's different now; deconstruction has established that the roadway possesses its own existence, independent of travelers and their purposes. Because events are just events, not related, deconstruction lets the gang reach back through the false connections of time and make the roadway into what it always should have been, regardless of the builders' original intentions.

It's the hardest work you've ever done. Sweat trickles down from under your hard hat, drips off your chin. You take off your jacket and lay it on the ground. But in the trench, you can see the progress you're making. Jerome pushes against the referential being of the roadbed. Just as the new figurality, the one you've been grinding toward, begins to take shape, the lunch whistle blows.

"We've got to keep at it," Brian says quickly, before anyone can get up and head for the catering truck that's just parked down the block. "If we knock off now, we'll get a regression to the opposite and we'll have to do most of the work all over again."

So on you go, though the savor of hot grease from the truck makes your stomach growl like an angry beast. Tony walks by, sees you're all too busy to go to lunch. He doesn't say anything; he knows deconstruction is delicate work and doesn't want to distract you. But when you get to a place where you can stop for a while, he comes back with a gray cardboard carton full of hamburgers, fries, and Cokes.

"Tony, you're a lifesaver," Brian says. Everybody else nods.

Tony just grins. "Keeping you folks doing your job is part of my job." He won't even let any of you pay for the food. He has other things to see to. With people like him in this business, you begin to understand why the rest of the academics in your gang aren't busting a gut trying to escape.

Then you unwrap your hamburger from its yellow waxed paper and sink your teeth in. It's burnt on the outside, raw and soggy in the middle, and it hasn't been hot, or even warm, for quite a while. "Dewishush," you say with your mouth full.

You eat fast. So does everyone else; the deconstruc-

tion you've established up to now is only metastable. If it regresses before you can establish and validate your new and strong synthesis, you'll be in deep *kimchi*, worse off than if you never started.

It tries to snap, too, not five minutes after you go back to work. It's Louis who saves the bacon with a beautiful adaptation from Derrida. Together, you force the road back toward the pattern unperceived by its designers, toward force and away from weakness, a signifying structure of the sort only deconstructive analysis can produce.

"*De la Grammatologie*," you say when you have a moment to catch your breath.

"Bet your ass." Louis sounds even more exhausted than you are. If he is, he has a right to be; he carried the ball when things were toughest. After that, you're going downhill. Deconstruction by its nature subverts what was authoritative and revises what has been accepted. The road will be, and indeed always *will have been*, as it should exist by your analysis, not as it was made—with good intentions, no doubt, but also with ultimate ignorance—by the authors of its design.

You keep close watch on the roadbed, tracking the progress your figurality makes in replacing its inadequate predecessor. For a long, tense moment, the deconstructive operation allows both versions of the roadbed to exist together. Then, as if in consummation, the veil is torn and the new figurality displaces the old for good.

Tony, naturally, is there when it happens. "Way to go," he says to Brian. "The night crew'll have to check out what you've done, of course, but it looks real good to me."

"Thanks." Brian points at you. "He pulls his weight. Glad you found him."

Tony nods. "I thought he looked good when I met him." You just stare down at your dirty Reeboks, but you feel nine feet tall, maybe ten. These guys are all right.

Brian glances at his watch. "My God, is it five o'clock already? We wouldn't have come close to finishing this stretch today without a whole gang." He turns to you. "Want to have a beer before you head home? I'll buy."

You're not much of a beer drinker, but you say, "Sounds wonderful. Thanks." Camaraderie counts.

Your joints creak as you stand up and stretch. All over the work site, men are putting away tools, heading for their cars or for the bus stop. *Quitting time*, you think. Fair enough—you've earned your day's pay, as Brian said when you started out what feels like a week ago.

A pretty redhead in *tight* jeans walks by across the street. Along with everyone else who notices her, you whistle like a steam engine. She just walks faster. A couple of guys laugh. You feel sheepish; you'd never have done that back on campus. But what the hell? You have to fit in where you work. ♦



# The Price of Civilization



Charles Sheffield

Everything turned out all right in the end, but if Beth had just told her father at the beginning what was happening, he could have made it a lot easier on her.

Todd would have found a way to explain things, and it would have *stopped*, then and there. He could have persuaded her. He knew he could. But he never had the chance.

It all started with one stupid field trip, no different from dozens Beth had taken at school over the past six years. Her class was driven sixty miles to the Bay, so that they could see the levees and salt farms and the new polders, already covered with sprouting algae. On the way home the skirt of the

Illustration by Terry Lee

bus developed a crack. It began to lose air and height. Rather than fray the skirt against the ground, the driver made them transfer to public vehicles for the rest of the way.

No big deal, and in its way quite exciting for Beth. Todd guessed that she had ridden the PV system maybe five times in her life, but never so far and never through the deep basement. When she got home that night, she was full of it.

"You stand at the top of the escalator, and you can't even see the bottom! There's people all the way, riding on every step. And when you get to the platforms and the speed slides, it's *noisy*, everybody talking at once. Even people who don't know each other talk and joke! I think it's a *lot* more fun than surface riding."

"The PV system makes a change, certainly," Todd said. He glanced across at Laura, who smiled and nodded. He didn't think she was really listening. It was the night of the week when she was home for dinner, but as usual her head was still at work. "If you had to ride the PV's every day, though," he went on, "why, then—"

But Beth was already off in a different direction.

"Daddy, what's *sbtupperbait*? Mandy says I'm trailing it, but she wouldn't tell me what it is. And it's not in my dictionary."

Todd wasn't sure how to handle that, but Beth had at last caught her mother's attention.

"You tell Amanda Wescott that she ought to have her mouth washed out with detergent." Laura Prince/Veblen turned to her husband. "And you, Todd, next time you see Gregg Wescott, you tell him that his daughter needs talking to. *He's* the one who tells us Mandy's a perfect little lady."

"I'll be seeing him tonight. He's coming over to discuss my idea for a Primera investment."

"Well, then. You tell him."

"Right. I will."

But Todd didn't. He was not good at arguing with Gregg, who was fifteen years older and far more experienced. But it had to be more than years, because Todd couldn't argue with Laura, either, who was his own age exactly. And when Wescott arrived at the Veblen home complex, he didn't give Todd a chance to mention what Mandy had done. He was focused on investment opportunities.

"Forget Primera," he said. "I've got something a whole lot better."

Laura had returned to work, while Beth had retired to her suite. So it was just Todd and Gregg.

"But you were the one who told me about Primera," Todd protested. "You said that the specialty real food market was hot."

"I did, and it was—two years ago, when I told you to go into it. It made financial sense. Not now, though. Do you have an hour to spare? If you do, come with me and I'll show you something."

He knew quite well that Todd had left the evening free, to talk investments. But Todd didn't really want to go out. "I don't know, Gregg. I told Laura I'd be home if she needed to reach me."

"Call her. I'm sure she'll tell you to protect the family holdings."

Todd didn't make the call. There was no doubt that Gregg was right. Laura had grown up in a middle-poor background, and she didn't ever intend to go back.

He sighed. "Let me just say goodnight to Beth. Then we can go."

He slipped away to her suite. Normally he would not have gone in without permission, but he was in a hurry. He expected to find her in the aquarium, but she wasn't there—or anywhere else that he looked. He tried her study last. It was empty, although her computer was turned on.

His only reason for going across to it was to see which age-level dictionary was online to her. Any full-adult access would have included *sbtupperbait* as a defined entry.

Sure enough, she was still connected to a juvenile base. He took the ten seconds necessary to perform a level upgrade, so she could check new words before she went blurring them out and upsetting her mother.

It was while he was waiting for the database substitution to be made that he actually read what was sitting on the screen.

*ELITE. Menu Select: History of the ELiTE—Need for—Opposition to—Defining Act—General Acceptance—Amendments.*

He assumed that it was part of a school project, but something must have made him uneasy because he took a mental note to find out just what Beth was trying to find out about the ELiTE Act. He also noticed the little deep-focus card sitting next to the console, with its image of a smiling youth and the scribbled name beneath, *Danny*. He made no connection between that and what was on the computer screen, and other than wondering why such a handsome, bright-eyed lad had never been mentioned by Beth, he felt little curiosity. Beth and Mandy Veblen/Wescott and Chi-Chi Singletary all had their private crushes on other students. They were as changeable as the wind, and the girls felt that parents had no business in that area. Todd rather agreed with them.

"Find her?" said Gregg when he returned.

"She's in the house somewhere, according to the house monitor."

Todd again felt a strange unease. But although later he blamed himself for not following up and seeking out Beth, he never had reason to change his mind about his statement. She *must* have been in the house, that night at least, for that was the same day as the first meeting with Danny, down on the PV basement platform, and Todd later confirmed that there had been nothing more than five minutes of talk and the exchange of names and pictures between Danny and Beth.

"In the house, but she's vanished." Gregg Wescott laughed. "Tell me about it. It's the same with Amanda. Always says she's in and the monitor agrees, but somehow I can't find her at night. I think she hides on purpose. Ready? Let's go."

The house system checked the two men out. Gregg gave the system a forwarding destination for calls.

"Not my house," he said. "What I want to show you is at the Commensal."

That was good, at least so far as Todd was concerned. Gregg's family home was nearly an hour's run, but he time-shared a fifteen-unit Commensal no more than ten minutes away by surface net.

The night was warm for April, and the vehicle top stayed open. The air was unusually clear, with at least a dozen Hilabs visible as bright points of light moving steadily across the southern sky.

"That reminds me," said Gregg. "Laura promised me that the next time she went up, you and I could go along."

It sounded like a change of subject, but Todd knew better. The Neoteen backers were looking for funds. Laura said that everything in the orbiting Neoteen Hilab was fine, and she had been encouraging Gregg to buy in. But there had been rumors of problems. Gregg, cautious and conservative with his money, wanted to go up and see for himself before he made any investment.

"She's lifting again in a couple of days," Todd said. "I'll ask her."

"You'll come?"

"Sure." It was the easy answer, the one that avoided all argument. But later Todd would feel bad about that, too, because he became convinced that he had left Beth at just the wrong time.

Gregg had been counting on the Commensal being unoccupied at this hour, and it was. The cleaning units had finished work and retreated into their wall receptacles, and the table was completely clear. Gregg went across to his personal floor-to-ceiling locker, opened it, and removed something in a white plastic box.

He moved across to open the R-chef, keeping his back to Todd and shielding what he was holding. After a couple of minutes of interaction between Gregg and the console, the chef door opened again.

Gregg turned back to Todd, sitting at the table. "How long since you tried Repro?"

"I'm not sure."

"But years at least, right? Okay, now try this." He was holding two plates. "Seem identical, right?"

Todd nodded.

"I'll tell you what you're looking at. One is genuine Primera black Beluga caviar from the Caspian sturgeon farms, refrigerated on the spot and flown twelve thousand kilometers to delight your palate. And one isn't. Now, you tell me which one you like better."

Todd picked up the thin piece of toast, sniffed the lemon juice, and took a mouthful. He chewed slowly, savoring the flavor and in no hurry to swallow. He nodded. It was first-rate.

Gregg handed him a glass of water, and another fragment of dry toast. "Clean your palate, and then try the other."

Todd did, wondering if Gregg was—not for the first time—fooling him by giving him two identical dishes. He ate the second serving of caviar, slowly and thoughtfully.

"They taste almost the same. But that one"—Todd pointed to the first plate—"is just a little bit better."

"I agree. Know why? Because it's a little bit less salty. But that one, the 'inferior' one"—Gregg pointed to the second plate—"that's the Beluga caviar. The one you like better, this one, is Repro. Pure reprocessed shit." He laughed, as Todd put his fingers to his lips. "See what I mean? The Repro people have said there's been a taste breakthrough on synthetics so many times, nobody believes them. But this time there *has* been a breakthrough. Believe me, Todd, some day soon people are going to catch on, and the bottom will fall out of the real food market. When that happens, Primera stock won't be worth transferring."

People still bought real wines, thought Todd, and they certainly couldn't justify the expense for those on grounds of taste. Why should real food be any different? But he didn't want to argue. And Gregg's advice had always worked in the past.

He sighed. "So what do you recommend instead of Primera?"

A big household argument blew up the next day, one that took Todd's mind off any thought of the ELIE or his daughter's perplexing interest in them.

On her next birthday Beth would be old enough for first reconstruction, and she said she wanted a lot of it. She was not satisfied with her nose, her eyelids, her cheekbones, her lips, her chin, her ears . . .

The list was endless, whereas when Todd looked at his daughter he marveled how Laura's strong, slightly angular features and his own rounded, nondescript face could have combined to produce such perfection.

Beth was so beautiful. Any change would be a form of despoilment.

Fortunately, Laura agreed completely. "Not one thing," she said. "It's not as though this is the only chance. You can make your list again in three years, when you're fifteen, and then we'll see."

"But my legs—"

"—are still growing, and will be for years and years. I said no, Beth. Do I need to say it again?"

"You don't *want* me to be beautiful." Beth was almost crying as she turned to her father for support.

But Todd shook his head and said, "You *are* beautiful, sweetie. The most gorgeous daughter anybody ever had."

"Other people don't think so!" Beth ran out of the room, leaving Todd to ponder those words. Other people? But two days later he thought he suddenly understood the whole thing.

It was Sunday midday. There had been a high wind on Saturday night, followed by a false entry alarm on the house monitor. Now the sky was black and it was all set for a thunderstorm. Half a dozen flashes and warning rumbles were closing in from the east as Todd went hurrying around the Veblen compound perimeter, trying to check if one of the miniature sensors had been damaged before the coming downpour made his task far more difficult. Near the rear entrance, next to a little sweet-smelling patch of hyacinths, he found Beth sitting on a

wooden garden seat. She was giggling, her eyes bright with happiness. Next to her, talking animatedly, sat a tall, serious-faced youth. He looked about three years older than Beth.

Todd was walking on springy grass, and neither of them noticed him until he was a few steps away. Then the boy jerked upright, and Beth followed his startled look.

"Daddy!" She glanced from one to the other, quickly and nervously. "Dad, I want to introduce you to a friend. This is Danny."

"I know it is. I'm Todd Veblen."

"Pleased to meet you." The boy hesitated, but at last he reached out and shook Todd's outstretched hand. "I'm Danny Shawner. You *know*?"

"I saw your picture." Todd felt guilty, admitting to Beth that he had been in her study uninvited; but it was worth it to see the radiant, chin-to-eyebrows blush that lit her face.

"Daddy!" Beth's protest was interrupted by a jagged spear of forked lightning, much closer, followed within a couple of seconds by the thunderclap. Huge raindrops suddenly spattered the garden seat.

"Inside!" shouted Todd, while the rumbles were still going on. He hustled them toward the rear of the house, giving neither Beth nor Danny time to object.

By the time they had covered the forty yards between bench and house, rain was pelting down. Todd headed for the nearest way in, through French windows into the "music room." Todd thought of it like that, because there were a dozen instruments scattered around, both natural and electronic. But no one in the house played any of them.

"Well!" He closed the double doors as rain sheeted against them. "Just in time."

He stared at Danny. The boy was standing very close to the door, raindrops sending highlights off his thick black hair. "Are you all right?"

Danny's eyes were moving all the time, out at the rain and then back to the musical instruments. "I ought to be getting back home."

"In this! How far do you have to go?"

"A few miles," said Danny vaguely. He glanced beseechingly at Beth. "I shouldn't stay."

"Look, you're very welcome here," Todd waved his arm around the room. "And I'm going." It seemed obvious that he was the cause of the tension—the other two had been perfectly at ease before he arrived. "Make yourself at home, stay as long as you need to, and I'll order you both something to eat."

"I shouldn't." But Danny was staring wide-eyed at the electronic grand, and Todd did not miss that.

"Do you play?"

"Some." It was as though Danny's legs were carrying him across to the instrument against his will, and planting him on the padded seat.

"Then go ahead. I have other things to do." Todd wanted to make it very clear that he was leaving. He went to Danny's side, and again held out his hand. "It was nice meeting you. You are welcome here any time."

There was another moment of uncertainty before Danny Shawner stood up, took Todd's hand, and shook it. "Thank you, Mr. Veblen. But please don't get any food for me. I really have to go, as soon as the rain eases up."

"Which could be hours. I'll order something anyway. Beth will eat it all, even if you don't."

"Daddy!"

Todd left the room without replying. He closed the door smiling, and stood outside for quite a while. He was not eavesdropping, at least not to conversation. He was listening to music. It began, hesitantly for the first few seconds, and then confident and glittering, a chromatic and complicated piece. Danny Shawner had said he played "some," but the sounds that filled the music room were like nothing produced before inside the Veblen compound.

Todd felt ridiculously pleased with himself. Danny was handsome, and he had talent. But more than that, Todd liked him, and had from the moment he saw him. Danny was really personable, in a quiet sort of way. Trust Beth to find, for the first boy that she had a real interest in—and she *did* have an interest in Danny, no doubt about it—somebody out of the usual run. And yet, when Laura called that night, to say that she would not be home until very late, Todd mentioned nothing to her about Danny Shawner.

Why? He could say that he did not want Laura giving Beth a hard time. But he didn't believe that answer.

It was not until the next morning, during his routine half-yearly physical examination, that Todd had time to ponder the question again.

He had to sit for a full hour in the monitor chamber, naked and as motionless as possible, while the tiny pill-sized internal inspection device that he had swallowed did its work. He could not feel it, but he knew it was wandering along through his body on a programmed route, while the external imagers and chemical sensors monitored his other functions. He was thinking, not for the first time, that people wouldn't always have to put up with this indignity, someday there would be a *civilized* way to perform detailed medical diagnosis; then his mind strayed again to Danny Shawner.

He thought not of Danny's quick intelligence and thoughtful eyes, but of his clothing.

Todd had no particular interest in his own clothes, and he wore whatever the automat put out for him every day. But kids were different. They were strong on cliques and covens and group identifiers. Beth and Amanda and Chi-Chi put their Lazarus club patches on everything they wore, and the boys Todd knew from their school were no different.

But he had seen nothing on Danny's dark clothes, not one mark to show which societies and associations and clans the youth belonged to.

It was a small thing, but Todd found that it would not leave his mind. He waited impatiently for the examination to be over. As soon as it was finished he swallowed the second pill. This one had been assembled by the online patient care clinic in real-time, during his examination,

and it would correct and balance every minor physiological abnormality or chemical imbalance. Since the readouts showed nothing to require a more substantial treatment, Todd was free to leave.

He took the surface net, not to his home but to his own nearby Commensal. Four other owners were present, but no one was using any of the computers.

Todd signed on and made a general query for the county. He wanted to know how many *Danny Shawners* were listed.

"Are *Daniel Shawner* and *Dan Shawner* acceptable alternate forms for *Danny Shawner*?" asked the search routine.

"Sure."

"There are four entries. Watch for their display."

The information was very limited. Call ID's were given, but addresses, data receipt points and all personal data were missing. Todd could not tell which one, if any, was the Danny that he wanted. He hesitated before he took the next step. At last he entered his Inner Circle code, the sequence of digits that would allow him access to data banks denied to the general public. Originally he had not wanted to join the Inner Circle at all, but Gregg Wescott and Eileen Veblen/Wescott had reinforced Laura's opinion. "Sure you'll be joining an exclusive club," said Gregg, "and sure, you may never need your membership. But you're a Veblen, dammit, and you deserve something special. There could come a day when you'd regret not having Inner Circle access." And they had been right. Todd repeated his query for *Dan/Danny/Daniel Shawner*. This time the Inner Circle codes could enter protected files, and information spilled over the display. He had to take it in sections. Fortunately, subject age was one of the first data items in the file.

*Daniel Gerald Shawner. Date of birth, January 28, 1989. Age, 53 years. Address*

Todd cut it right there. Rejuvenation was coming along, but if there were any technique to make a 53-year-old look like Danny, Eileen Veblen/Wescott would have used it long ago.

*Dan Jackson Shawner. Date of birth, July 3, 2004.*

Still no good.

*Rupert Daniel Xavier Shawner. Date of birth, October 14, 1944.*

Worse and worse, nearly a hundred years old.

*Daniel Sims Shawner. Date of birth, February 23, 2025.*

*Bingo*, thought Todd, just about as old as he looked. But the readout was continuing:

*Age, 17 years. Address, 4033 Ridenour Station, Columbia. Access codes—*

*Columbia*. It didn't look right for Danny. That was way over on the other side of the county, in an area that Todd never visited. How could Beth have possibly met Danny if he came from so far away?

But the display was continuing: —*classification, ELiE. Parents: Arturo Giacomo Shawner, father, classification, ELiE. Mary Lou Draco, mother, classification, ELiE.*

ELiE? No way! That clinched it for Todd. Not one of those "Daniel Shawners" could be Beth's Danny. He

must have misheard the name. Had Beth ever spelled it out for him? Maybe it was *Shbomer*, or *Schbomer*.

Todd tried again, working his way through all the spelling alternatives that he or the computer could think of.

Nothing. He leaned back in his chair. And as he did so, an association finally forced itself into his mind: Beth's computer inquiry about the ELiE, with Danny's picture sitting beside the console.

*ELiE*. It couldn't be; there was no way that it would happen. They couldn't have even met. (But what about the ride home from the Bay, the one that the school had made through the Public Vehicle system? If Beth had been waiting on the platform when Danny had happened to come along . . .)

Todd left the Commensal in a trance. He remembered nothing of his journey home. He needed to talk to Beth—talk to her when Laura was not there. But today Laura had said that she might be home early. If she were . . .

Todd ran into the Veblen compound, fast enough to make the house monitor stutter into a HALT AND IDENTIFY command before it matched Todd's template. There was, thank Heaven, no sign of Laura.

"Is my wife home?"

"No, she is not," said the house monitor. "She sent a message for you. She will arrive at 1700 hours, and she urgently needs to meet with you."

Less than half an hour. "Let me know when she gets here." Todd hurried on, straight into Beth's suite.

He found her there—with Danny Shawner. They were sitting side by side on a couch, looking over one of Beth's old scrapbooks of family events and family history.

Todd jerked to a halt. He had to ask the question—and suddenly he could not find the words. Laura or Gregg would have done it in an instant, without a second thought. But Todd did not want to hurt Beth.

"Hi there." His voice sounded peculiar, even to him. "Hi, Beth. Hi, Danny. Looking at the skeletons in the old family closet, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Danny. He stood up, still holding the book. "Beth was reading me some old news items about Stanford Veblen. I had no idea that he was her great-grandfather."

"You've heard of him?" Todd felt the knot in his chest loosen.

"Yes, sir. He's very famous. He was the founder of Angstrom Enterprises, and he developed the first generation of micro-robots. But there are things about his life in here"—Danny lifted the scrapbook—"that I'd certainly never heard before. See."

He was holding the book out to Todd, inviting him to read from it.

"I got a bit of grit in my eye," said Todd, "riding in on the net. Itched and hurt like fury, and it's still watering. Would you read that for me?"

He was astonished at his own cunning. But then his heart sank. Danny was hesitating, glancing first at Beth, then at Todd, and back again.

"Go ahead," said Todd. *And I'm praying that you can.* And when Danny still hesitated, "What's wrong?"



The youth looked again at Beth, his face unhappy. "Well, Mr. Veblen, some of the things in this article are not very nice."

"Oh, that's all right." Beth laughed. "Daddy knows about *them*—the whole family does."

"Very well." Danny nodded, and began to read: "An individual of unquestioned genius but equally undeniable eccentricity, Stanford Veblen sometimes sought funding for his audacious enterprises in ways that brand him as a rapscallion of the lowest order. He sold to his own mother large amounts of worthless stock in insolvent corporations, bankrupting her in the process. He drained employee pension funds of companies that he owned. He sought to gain access to the trust fund income established by his uncle for Veblen's own children—"

Danny stopped. "His mother? And his own children?"

"That's right." Todd was grinning, but he felt like laughing outright. Danny had read smoothly, flawlessly, effortlessly, without stumbling at all over the longest words. He just *couldn't* be an ELiE. Todd himself would certainly not have read so well.

"My father was one of those children," Todd went on. "But don't worry on our behalf. Stanford *tried* to get his hands on the trust funds, in every way he could think of. But they were tied up way too tight. Beth's right, you see; the whole family knew Stanford was a scoundrel, even then, although no one seems to remember it now."

Danny was staring at Todd's grinning face. He must have sensed something odd in the whole situation. Too late, Todd rubbed at his "injured" eye. But Danny had already placed the book down on a table and was looking at Beth.

"It's nearly five, you know. I ought to be going."

"You can't—not until you play." Beth turned to her father. "He wrote a piece of music, just for me, and he promised to play it today." She touched Danny on the arm, hardly more than the lightest of fingertip contact. "I won't let you go 'til you play."

The expression on her face made Todd delighted and jealous all at once. How could a smile brim over with such happiness, how could eyes in a human head shine so bright? But that sort of loving look had once been reserved for Todd alone.

"I'll play it just once, then I'll go," Danny turned awkwardly to Todd. "It's nothing much, Mr. Veblen, but I'd be delighted for you to hear it, too."

"I'd love to. But not today, because I have things that must be done before dinner." That was a lie, but no more a lie than the grit in his eye, or Danny's polite invitation to come and listen. Beth's visitor didn't want Todd there when he played for Beth, any more than Beth herself wanted her father present—Todd could see her out of the corner of his eye.

But there was nothing to prevent Todd listening without them knowing. He waited until Beth and Danny had left for the music room, then quietly followed. The music that came through the closed door was fierce and urgent, not in the least what Todd thought of as "romantic." Yet it was more than Todd had ever created for anyone in his whole life.

Beth's a lucky girl, he thought, as he started back to the main atrium of the house. I don't think she knows how lucky.

Then he realized that he still had one nagging question: What was Danny's last name? It could not be any of the forms that he and the computer had tried. And where *did* he live? His clothes today had again lacked any form of clan or clique identification.

He could ask Beth, but he didn't want to interrupt. And suppose that she didn't know the answer? There was an easier way. Todd changed direction and headed for Beth's suite.

The deep-focus picture of Danny still sat next to the computer, but now it had its own little frame. Todd picked it up and walked with it closer to the room's monitor camera.

"Make a copy of this," he said. "I want a full-resolution facsimile placed into my private data files. Store it under *Danny*. Then I want a search-and-match for identification of the individual. If necessary, use my Inner Circle access code in the inquiry. I want the results of that in my private data file also."

"Yes, sir," said the house monitor. "It is copied. Search is beginning."

Todd replaced the image exactly where he had found it. Feeling like a sneak thief in his own home, he headed again for the main atrium.

Just in time. Before he got there, the closest speaker of the house monitor spoke to him again. "Your wife has arrived. She is waiting for you."

"Tell her I'll be there in a few seconds," Todd increased speed. For some reason he didn't want Laura wandering the compound, looking for him and possibly running into Beth and Danny.

When he reached the atrium he realized that there was no danger of that. Laura was sitting with her knees tight together and her look-what-you-did-to-me-now expression on her face.

"You are the absolute limit, you know," she said as a greeting. "Where the devil have you been? I tried your club, I tried your office. I tried Gregg, I tried the medical center, I tried your Commensal."

"I was all those places. You must have just missed me each time. What's the problem?"

"This is." Laura held up two thin cards. "Hilab entry permits. You told me that you and Gregg want to go up with me tomorrow. You put me to all the trouble of getting the permits—it's not like going on a tourist ride, you know; these are restricted premises. And then you do not one damn thing to get yourself ready."

"I forgot about it."

"I *know* you forgot. You think that makes me feel any better? You *always* forget. You'd forget your own head if it was loose. Gregg was *really* upset when he found out you'd promised to arrange it and then done nothing." She thrust the cards at Todd. "I've done all I can. If you and Gregg want to go up with me, you've got to take care of these, yourselves, before eight o'clock tomorrow morning. That's when you have to leave—if you leave."

"I'll do it." Todd grabbed the cards. If they *didn't* leave,

he knew he would be blamed by both Laura and Gregg. Why did they always seem to gang up on him?

Todd had expected a busy evening. It was more than busy. It was frantic. He and an irritated Gregg were chasing permits and approvals until well past midnight.

Todd had no chance to take a look at the new information in his private database until the next morning, moments before they left.

The search-and-match had been successful. The identification had been made. Todd saw Danny's picture and read the screen. He had seen the identification before: *Daniel Sims Shawner. Date of birth, February 23, 2025. Age, 17 years. Address, 4033 Ridenour Station, Columbia. Access codes, A-L. Classification: ELiTe.*

Gregg arrived, ready to go, and Laura brought him into the room just as a shocked Todd was clearing the screen. The three of them headed at once for the out-bound spaceport.

They must have talked, but Todd had no idea what was said. That single final word, *ELiTe*, roared inside his head and blotted out all external sounds.

Todd wanted to talk about the problem of Beth and Danny. He *needed* to talk about it. But he had no chance to do so until they were strapped in their seats, he next to Gregg, with Laura across the broad aisle and well out of earshot.

The pre-launch announcements had already been scrolled across the individual screens. Now they were being presented again as pure visuals, for the benefit of ELiTe passengers. That gave Todd his opening.

He pointed at the Emergency Action cartoon, which showed a little manikin floating down on an escape chute.

"Ever ask yourself what you would do if Amanda went on a date with one of the ELiTe?"

Gregg laughed. Given what had happened the previous night, he was in a surprisingly good mood. Having Laura around always seemed to make him effervescent. "Shoot myself, probably. But it's an impossible question, like, what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. Mandy's too smart to do anything like that."

"She might not even know. That he was ELiTe, I mean."

"Well, I sure as hell would—I'd check it out, first thing. And that would be the end of *that*." Gregg smacked his hand viciously onto the armrest between the two men, then looked self-consciously at Todd. "Hey, don't misunderstand me. I have nothing *against* the ELiTe. I work with them a lot, get on just fine with them. They have as many rights as we do. But hell, I don't have to tell you about ELiTs. Your own father was one of the prime architects of the Exempted Literacy Employee Act."

"He was never all that happy with it."

"Well, he should have been. If he were alive today, he could be proud of himself."

There was a period of necessary silence. The ascent had begun, and the passengers were pinned back in their seats by a force of three gravities. It was four more

minutes before the pressure eased and Gregg could wave his hand at the window, down toward the fast-receding Earth.

"I don't want to come on like the ancient geezer, but I am a good bit older than you and I remember what it was like *before* the ELiTe act was passed. It was *terrible*, hunger and war and violence and instability, everywhere you looked. If Porter Veblen were alive today, he'd have every reason to feel proud of his work. It may not be Paradise on Earth, but anybody from half a century ago would think it is. Nobody's starving, nobody's sick, nobody's scared. There's no war, and almost no murder and violent crime."

"Dad was never convinced that the changes had anything to do with the passing of the ELiTe Act. He always said all those things would have arrived anyway with mandatory birth control and stable population."

"Sure. Maybe they would. And maybe they *wouldn't*. Todd, I knew your dad. He was one of the finest, most thoughtful men who ever walked the Earth, and that's just the way he *would* talk, giving the credit due to him to someone else. Porter Veblen helped to change the world once, and if he were alive he might have the nerve to change it again. But you find me *anybody* who would be willing to take the risk of going back to the old system."

"Maybe some of the ELiTe would."

"They *wouldn't*, you know. That's been established in surveys time and time again. You're forgetting something, Todd. The ELiTe don't read and write, and some of them are pretty damn primitive, but in a lot of ways they're just as smart as we are. They don't want to get closer to us—any more than we want to be closer to them. And they know, as well as we do, that the world tried a hundred different systems in the past. But there's one big difference between all those old societies and this one. *Ours works*. If you're rational, you choose to stay with what we have now—unless you're *looking* for wars to start up again, or you *want* to see hungry kids or sick men and women."

"Equal opportunity—" Todd said. But the vehicle announcement overrode his voice.

THE FORCES THAT YOU WILL FEEL FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES ARE ENTIRELY NORMAL. WE ARE APPROACHING FOUR HUNDRED KILOMETERS. THE ORBITING MOMENTUM BANK WILL BEGIN TO CHANGE OUR MOTION FROM VERTICAL TO HORIZONTAL, AND SET US INTO THE NEOTECEN HILAB RENDEZVOUS TRAJECTORY.

Entirely normal, perhaps, to a seasoned Hilab visitor. But for Todd, the odd combination of linear and circular accelerations left him unable to speak. And by the time it ended, they were moving along in a totally silent free-fall that made private conversation impossible. He noticed that Gregg was looking at him speculatively, and wondered if his own attitude had come across as casual as he would have liked. There was a horrible moment when Gregg turned to Laura, but he merely started to ask her about the agenda when they reached the Neotecen Hilab. Soon after that, the protocol of Hilab entry and quarantine made it difficult to think of anything else.

Laura Prince/Veblen was one of the initiators and principals of the Neotene Project, but that brought her husband and his friend no exemption from Hilab rules. They had signed nondisclosure agreements before they left Earth. Even so, they were deep-scanned on arrival for telemetry or recording devices.

While that was going on, Todd had time to realize just how much he wished that he were back home. So far as he was concerned the whole trip was totally irrelevant, because at Laura's urging the Veblen estate was already as deeply committed to the Neotene Project as Todd's financial managers thought prudent. No matter how much Todd liked or disliked what he was about to see, there was no way that he could put in additional Veblen capital.

There was also no way that he could get any of his money *out*, even if—an unlikely prospect—Laura would ever agree to let him try.

She knew as well as he did that his investment was at its limit. It was no accident that all her attention was on Gregg Wescott, while Todd was ignored as soon as the facilities inspection began.

"I'm sure you'll want to spend most of your time talking with the Neoteens themselves," she said to Gregg, "but we're going to start with the wombs, because that's where people say we're having problems. As you'll see, they are quite wrong."

So Laura knew about the same rumors that had worried Gregg. Todd trailed behind the other two as they headed for the wombs. Most of the Hilab living quarters were held at one-quarter gravity, but the artificial wombs were almost in free-fall—"because it makes no difference," explained Laura over her shoulder, "so long as you're going to be floating in a bath of amniotic fluid."

The wombs ranged along the whole interior side of the toroidal chamber. They were all the same size, each one almost large enough to contain a full-grown adult human curled into the foetal position.

"Not that it's necessary," said Laura. "Not with present plans. Although maybe in a few more years . . . Now, you can't actually see inside, of course, because there's no light source. But the ultrasounds give you all the detail you need. Look at the screen. These three are second trimester."

The screens showed three tiny humanoid forms, each no bigger than Todd's clenched fist. It was astonishing to think that he had once been that way himself, or that Beth had once been so small and tight-curved just so inside Laura herself.

*Beth. Todd could not control the onward rush of his thoughts. Beth. What are you doing right now?*

But Laura was moving on, too. "Nothing neotenic about any of those, of course. Or this group, either, which is still in the third trimester. But look at *these*." She had paused by another group of artificial wombs. "They look the same from the outside, but the babies inside could never be born to a natural mother. Neoteens, almost at the end of the fifth trimester. Their heads are twice the size of a normal woman's expanded birth canal—and the brain capacity is still growing as fast as ever. See?"

The ultrasounds display showed a couple of Neoteens as big in torso and limbs as a normal six-month-old baby, but with a much larger head and a massive jaw.

"How long do you keep them inside before they're born?" Gregg spoke for the first time since seeing the wombs. He was fascinated, without any of Todd's sense of revulsion.

"How long *do* we keep them, or how long *can* we keep them?" Laura was staring raply at the screen. Todd could not recall her ever looking at him with as much intensity.

"If we want to," she went on, "we can go well into the eighth trimester inside the womb, with no problems. Of course, long before that they've been receiving sensor inputs. We start with the basics—math, music, phonics—at the beginning of the third trimester. Normally we remove the babies from the wombs just before the end of the sixth. That's about ten weeks more, for these two. They'll be able to read by that time, and they already have a good working vocabulary. To give you a basis for comparison, if the Neoteens were normal babies, they'd be nine months old by the time they leave the artificial wombs. But that statement doesn't mean much, because a normal baby's brain growth would have slowed down long before that. Our Neotene's brain will keep growing at full speed for at least another year. It will mass a little more than three kilos when it's done, and that's double an average human brain."

Laura did something to the control panel on the front of each womb. "There. I just told them that we are here. Watch them, now. There are still plenty of Neotene mysteries, even in the wombs. We still don't know how they're able to move themselves like that when they're floating inside the fluid."

The babies were turning to a heads-up, face-on position on the display, as though staring out at the visitors. The eyes as seen by the ultrasounds were sunken and closed, overshadowed by the big, hairless cranium and the lengthened lower jaw. Todd wondered how much of that was an effect of the imaging system. "What do you mean, a good working vocabulary?" asked Gregg. He did not seem to feel Todd's uneasiness at what he was seeing. "They can't talk."

"Computer interface." Laura was working again at the panel. "I'm using it to say hello, and then tell them that we're going. Any other messages?" And, as Gregg shook his head, "All right, let's go. It's time for you to meet a couple of Neoteens that you *can* talk to."

Todd had seen the first ads for the Neotene Hilab before they were released. Laura had filled every output in the compound with them for weeks, inflicting them on Todd and herself at all times of day and in all sorts of environments.

The ads came in two forms, labeled by Laura as "personal" and "abstract." The "abstract" ones contained no sign of Neotene presence. They showed only a huge variety of new products and inventions raining down out of the open sky, with ridiculously low prices and ridiculously high capabilities. Then the camera angle slowly

changed, questing upward until finally the distant origin of the bounty raining onto Earth was revealed. It was a Hilab, with the single word NEOTEEN written on its circular base.

The “personal” ad showed the inside of the Hilab. A dozen kids wearing NEOTEEN as a clan emblem on their sleeveless shirts were whooping it up in riotous invention inside a scientific laboratory. They were laughing, swapping wisecracks, and clearly having a terrific time. But they were also handing what they made to a group of serious, sober adults, and it was clear from the latter’s awed and dumbfounded expressions that the gadgets produced so effortlessly were anything but goofy.

Advertisements were advertisements, nothing more. Todd had not expected to find either form of ad within the Neoteen Hilab. Yet what he saw was a curious mixture of two elements of the “personal” ad.

He and Gregg indeed went into a scientific lab, much like the one in the ad. They were introduced to half a dozen children, who were indeed wearing NEOTEEN emblems on their clothes. The youngsters looked no more than six or seven years old, although the sparse hair covering skulls too large for their bodies, together with the thin, delicate limbs, made ages hard to estimate. The lower jaws were oversized, fully as big as they had seemed in the artificial wombs, and their wide-spaced teeth jutted backward behind full lips.

But it was not any abnormality of feature that Todd found so disconcerting. It was the expressions. The faces were those of the *adults* in the ads—serious, brooding, and lacking any trace of carefree childhood.

The Neoteens did not joke. They did not laugh. They wanted to talk about what they were doing, and it was clear at once that they had been told that Gregg was the prime target.

Todd was ignored, until Laura caught his eye and jerked her head for him to follow her outside. “You’re bored, Todd,” she said, once they had stepped beyond the deep doorway of the lab. “I was afraid you would be. How would you like to be given a tour of the Hilab, while Gregg and I are in there talking?”

Todd nodded. It was not like Laura to be so considerate of his feelings, but he certainly did not want to appear ungrateful. He was handed over at once to a junior and non-Neoteen Hilab staff member. The man at least treated Todd with deference—probably because he knew the Veblen name, or Todd’s relationship with Laura.

As the tour began, it occurred to Todd that Laura had been wrong. He had not been bored back there; he had been *disturbed*. The Neoteens might be much smarter than other humans, he was prepared to believe that. But he shuddered at the idea that any child of his might ever look as they looked.

On the other hand, they were humans, and not dumb equipment. Once you got over the look of the Neoteens themselves, what they had to say would surely be much more interesting than any Hilab tour.

Todd was already regretting his decision to go along with Laura’s suggestion. His guide was taking him past standard life-support systems, laboratories, living quar-

ters, and manufacturing facilities. Todd had no more interest in factories in space than he had in those back on Earth, particularly when much of the equipment had a run-down and seedy look to it. Like most other space structures, this Hilab had probably been underutilized for a long time. Todd guessed that it had been going cheap, which was why Laura and her backers had snapped it up for the Neoteen Project.

The tour seemed to go on forever. The only item that really caught Todd’s interest was one that had more to do with Earth than with the Hilab. It was a high-resolution point-and-shoot observing instrument, where the operator could specify a location on the surface of the Earth. The big telescope would then focus and hold on that target, as long as it was above the horizon. Adaptive optics compensated for atmospheric turbulence, and the picture seemed to be taken from no more than a few hundred feet away.

While the tour guide looked on impassively—probably every visitor from Earth tried to see his own house—Todd compulsively dialed in the coordinates of the Veblen compound. It was late afternoon there by local Earth time, and sunny. Beth ought to have been home from school for a couple of hours. Todd scanned the garden of the compound. There was no sign of Beth—or of Danny. But they might be inside the house, where remote observation was impossible.

He watched for many minutes, not sure what he was hoping or fearing to see, until the movement of the Hilab in its orbit began carrying him away over the horizon. And then, in the last few moments, when the oblique viewpoint made details much harder to make out, he caught sight of two figures approaching the compound.

Beth and Danny? It had to be, they were just the right relative height, and the taller one was dressed in the usual dark clothes. They were heading for the house.

For the music room. Or—for Beth’s suite?

Well, if they were, so what? They were responsible kids, good kids. Both of them. Even if Danny was . . . what he was.

ElitE. *ElitE*. The worry came back, full force.

Todd didn’t remember much of the rest of the tour. By the time his guide left him at the Lab, the Neoteen children had gone and Gregg and Laura were sitting alone, deep in conversation. Todd halted before the deep doorway of the room, still full of his own thoughts and reluctant to go in and disturb the other two.

“I was sure you would,” Laura was saying.

Gregg nodded. “I know you were, but I don’t think I believed you. *Very* impressive. But there’s one question that you never have answered.”

“What’s that?” Laura caught Gregg’s questioning glance. “It’s all right, go ahead. The Neoteens are busy, and everyone else around here can be trusted.”

“Very well. Let’s talk about *failures*. You’re trying something that’s never been tried before, ever. It’s a great experiment, but it is still an experiment. You must have failures.”

“We’ve had deaths, certainly. Miscarriages, accidents.”

“Sure. But I don’t mean those. Don’t play dumb with

me, Laura. You know just what I'm getting at. New outside brains, new in-womb teaching methods, new environment. All the results can't be positive. You must have instabilities. Madness. Maybe dangerous madness."

Laura was nodding quietly. "I won't deny it. But obviously I'm not going to talk about it."

"You need to—if you want an investor."

"Damnation." Laura glared at Gregg. Todd had seen that look often enough, but Gregg didn't blink or back off. Finally it was Laura who snorted and shook her head.

"All right; easy come, easy go. So I lose an investor. But I'll give you your answer—with a question. Why do you think we put the Neotene Project up here, in a Hilab?"

"I assumed it was for the low gravity. The oversized heads, and the thin bodies—"

"Never. We could provide supports for those back on Earth."

"Cost, then? No, that's ridiculous; it costs *more* up here. What?"

"The *laws*, Gregg. The damned laws, national and international. But they don't apply to the Hilabs. They don't apply to what might happen to some of the Neoteens." Laura laughed, with no trace of humor. "There, are you happy now? You wanted to know, and now you do know. And I lose an investor."

"*Wrong*." Gregg reached out, grabbed Laura's hand, and shook it. "You found one. Do you know what I look for when I make a financial investment? I look for *commitment*—for people who do what has to be done to make it work. Even if that means hardship for some."

"Hardship? That's a nice word for it. Isn't this the same Gregg Wescott that told me not long ago that we live in Paradise?" But Laura was smiling, really smiling.

"You remember it wrong. Utopia, I said, not Paradise."

"Utopia, Paradise. What's the difference?"

"A big one. You see, Laura, in Paradise everyone is happy. In Utopia some people will still be miserable."

Most of the conversation between Gregg and Laura had washed right over Todd, who was absorbed with his own worries. But he caught the last sentence, and he resonated strongly with its last word.

*Miserable.*

He backed away from the doorway. Gregg was right. If this were Utopia, at least one person in it was totally miserable. Todd did not want to talk to anyone.

And yet Todd *had* to talk. He could not mention the matter to Laura, because although she would certainly *listen*, she would just as certainly not *understand*. To her everything was always black and white, no shades of grey, no room for indecision.

So it had to be Gregg. Gregg was the best listener that Todd knew. But the conversation had to wait, for what felt like forever, until the two of them were on the ship in the descent phase of the return to Earth. Laura had stayed behind, to work in the Hilab for a few more days, and at last Todd was free to voice his worries.

He tried to ease into things gradually. "While you were with the Neoteens," he began, "I used the big on-board telescope. I took a look at the Veblen compound."

"Because you wanted to know what was going on with Beth," said Gregg flatly. "I hope you saw her. You know, she's been on my mind, too, ever since we talked on the way up."

Todd felt dizzy, and it had nothing to do with motion sickness. "On *your* mind? I don't see why."

"You asked me how I would like it if Amanda dated an ELiTE. Some people might drop in a question like that as a purely academic notion, but that's not your style. It *is* Beth, isn't it? You think she might be getting interested in one of the ELiTE."

"It's worse than that." Todd felt that he was betraying his daughter, but it was too late to stop. "She's seen him already, I don't know how many times. She really likes him."

And then the whole story came bubbling out, from the suspicion of a first meeting down in the PV basement level, through the picture of Danny in her room and the ELiTE inquiry on her computer, on to Todd's final confirmation, just before he left for the Neotene Hilab, that Danny was definitely an ELiTE.

Gregg listened to everything without a word. And after Todd finished by asking, "What do you think I ought to do?" Gregg still sat silent for a long time, staring tight-lipped out of the tiny ship window. They were within a hundred kilometers of the surface and feeling the first impulse of the ground laser, but outside there was still nothing to see but open space.

"I know," said Gregg. "I know that I play the older-and-wiser game a fair amount, and it irritates the hell out of you. It would me, too, in your position. But believe me, I try to be your friend. If I tell you to be careful about certain investments, like that one . . ." Gregg looked straight up, and smiled. The Neotene Hilab was almost certainly not in that direction, but Todd knew what he meant. "I probably sound pushy and interfering, especially since I'm going to put money into it myself. But what's right for me may not be for you. I try to help."

"I know you do." It was true. Gregg's advice had kept Todd out of trouble a score of times.

"Well, keep that in mind before you decide that I'm sticking my nose in now. And remember, you did ask me." The smile vanished from Gregg's face. "First, let's talk facts. Tell me what you know about Danny Shawner."

"That's one of the reasons I find this whole thing so difficult. He's a really great kid. I like him a lot."

"*Facts*, Todd." Gregg did not raise his voice. "You like him. That's really nice, but it's hardly a fact. ELiTEs can be as likeable as anyone else. What do you *know* about him?"

Todd thought of the scanty data that he had seen as a result of his data query. "Not much, until I get a better data set. How old he is, where he lives, the names of his parents, that's about it."

"Both ELiTEs?"

Todd did not say anything.

"Good enough." Gregg sighed. "Let me tell you something you won't want to hear. You already know *everything*, everything that you need to know about Danny Shawner. You know that he is an ELiTE. That's enough."



Has Laura met him? Don't even bother to answer that, I'm quite sure she hasn't."

"She hasn't. But, Gregg, he's really smart, and he's talented, too. He must be self-taught, but he can read and write better than any non-ELiE you ever met. Better than I can."

"I believe you. But that's not the point, is it?"

"And he has terrific musical ability. I feel sure he's brighter than I am."

"Could be. Still irrelevant. Don't fall into the old fallacy, Todd. I've often wondered why you and Laura didn't have another child."

"I'd have loved to. Laura vetoed it."

"Well, if she ever changed her mind, you'd be approved for a second one *instantly*."

"I don't fool myself, Gregg. I'm not smart. Laura's the bright one."

"So what? Todd, your cousin is a wonderful woman, but do you think I married Eileen for her *brains*? She's like you, you've both got it there." Gregg pointed to Todd's crotch. "In the genes. For God's sake, your father was Porter Veblen, and *his* father was Stanford Veblen. They're known through the Seven States, both of them. But Danny Shawner, he's nothing, and his whole family is nothing. Try saying this to the people who share your Commensal: *My daughter, Beth, is the granddaughter of Porter Veblen, and the great-granddaughter of Stanford Veblen. She is dating an ELiE, and she wants to marry him.*"

Todd shook his head.

"Unthinkable? Right. *Unspeakable*? Definitely. I agree completely. So you have to ask what it would be like if one of the Bulletins found out that a Veblen was going around with a kid from an Exempted Literacy Employee family—and that you already knew about it, and did nothing. Hell, never mind the Bulletins, think what Laura would say."

Todd thought about it. "She wouldn't *say*. She'd eat my liver."

"So it's obvious what you have to do, isn't it? You have to talk to Beth. You have to tell her she can't see this Danny person any more. Ever. Promise me, Todd. Promise me you'll do that."

They were in the final minutes of descent, riding the laser in to a feathery landing. Todd stared straight ahead. At last he gave a little nod.

"Say it, Todd. Say it out loud."

"I'll do it. I'll talk to her." Gregg was right; of course he was. And saying what must be done somehow made Todd feel better. "I'll tell Beth she can't have anything more to do with Danny."

"Well done." Gregg clapped his hand on Todd's shoulder. "You're a good father, Todd."

"It will be hard. Really hard. On Beth, I mean."

"Of course it will. Hard on you, too. But worth it. Todd, there's one other thing I have to say, and excuse me if I get personal. I suppose you realize that Beth and this ELiE kid could be having sex?"

"For God's sake, Gregg. Beth's a *child*. She won't be thirteen for another two months."

"So? Did she reach menarche yet?"

"What?"

"Did she have her first period?"

"Long since. According to Laura, it was more than a year ago."

"There you are, then. Don't forget you're dealing with ELiEs." Gregg's voice took on a rare hardness. "As they say, 'If she's old enough to bleed, she's old enough to butcher.' Todd, you have to get Beth inoculated."

"Inoculated!"

"You heard me. For your and Laura's sakes, as well as hers. It's not just a matter of diseases. What would you do if Beth became pregnant?"

"I don't know." Beth, his little Beth, pregnant? It was ridiculous! "I can't even imagine it."

"You're probably thinking, no problem, she could always get rid of the foetus."

"I wasn't thinking that at all."

"Laura would think that, as soon as she heard about it. But suppose Beth didn't want to? Suppose she *insisted* on having the baby? You couldn't force her not to, though we can both imagine her life after that. You know what it's like for ELiE and non-ELiE mixtures; they're neither one thing nor the other."

"I know it. Of course I know it."

"But *Beth* doesn't. All she sees is this nice, friendly kid who met her in the PV system and likes to hang around her. She's too young to protect herself—which means you have to protect her. It's your duty, as her father. She has to be inoculated."

"I could never tell her that."

"There's no reason why you should. No reason she'll ever know about it."

"The doctors—"

"You can manage without a physician for a simple inoculation. All it takes is a two-second skin spray; you can use it on her at home when she's asleep. If you do what I did for Mandy, and get one that lasts just a couple of years, it will keep her from getting pregnant until she's old enough to make the right decisions for herself."

"The *standard* inoculation kit?"

But Gregg had paused, as though thinking about something else. "Don't ever forget you're a Veblen," he said abruptly. "We have to protect the family name. I'll get the kit for you. That way there's no danger Beth might see the transaction log."

The ship had touched down gently. Todd had not even noticed the final stages of descent, but suddenly the port buildings were visible outside the little windows, and the doors were already cranking open.

Gregg stood up, stretching luxuriously. Todd remained in his seat.

"What about Laura?" he said. "What do you think I ought to tell her?"

"Everything. But not yet. Do that *after* Beth's been inoculated, and after she stops seeing the ELiE. Then Laura will tell you that you did all the right things."

Gregg made it sound easy. For him, or for Laura, it probably *was* easy. You did what had to be done, and

said what had to be said, fast and efficient, and that was that.

Gregg had the inoculation kit the next day, so that Todd could use it before Laura returned. It was as easy to administer as Gregg had promised. Todd applied it that same night, as soon as Beth was soundly asleep. The spray was almost invisible, vanishing at once into the hollow of her neck just below the collarbone. Beth did not move.

But the rest of it was not so easy. Todd made sure that he was in the dining room the next morning when Beth came down for breakfast. He stood behind her as she waited for the chef to open and deliver her order, and she struggled to say the words that he had rehearsed a hundred times.

*Beth, you must stop seeing Danny. He's an ELitE, and his kind and ours don't mix. I don't want you to see him any more.*

He opened his mouth.

And could not speak. Beth was singing softly to herself, a breathy little song of youth and happiness in a world where everything was sunny morning. Todd walked behind her as she went to the table, and sat opposite while she ate honey rusks and drank hot tea. When she had finished she smiled at him, deliberately ran a finger around the plate to scoop up warm honey, and placed her sticky fingertip in her mouth.

He sighed. "You're lucky your mother isn't here to see you do that."

She smirked at him. "I know. But you won't tell her, will you?"

She knew him, all too well. He shook his head, and watched as she wandered away out of the dining room. He had missed his chance, and he only dimly understood why. He consoled himself with the thought that it was a Remote day for school. Beth would study at home, so he would have other chances to talk to her.

Todd had those chances, plenty of them. He did not take them. And in midafternoon, Danny arrived.

This was surely the right time, the moment when Todd could explain to both of them the hopeless dead-end nature of what they were doing. But Danny was bursting with a new discovery, of an old and wonderful writer whose word magic could carry you away to places you had never been before.

"Where but to think is to be full of sorrow, and leaden-eyed despairs, where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow." Just *listen* to that!"

It meant nothing to Todd; but he heard Beth catch her breath, and suddenly his own chance to speak had vanished. Soon the two left the atrium together, hardly aware of Todd's existence. When he followed a few minutes later there was no sign of them. The house monitor was unable to tell him where they had gone.

That was his first failure, but not his last. He had breakfast with Beth again the next morning, and spoke to her only about school work. Danny came soon after midday. Todd joined them in the music room, but once the three of them were together it was Todd who

seemed like the intruder. The other two were so happy, so deep in conversation, so well suited in interests and personality, so clearly a *couple*.

But Laura would be home in another day. Already she had extended her stay at the Neoteen Hilab longer than usual, to accommodate another brief visit there from Gregg. If she returned, met Danny, and then learned of Todd's promise to Gregg . . .

Todd made up his mind. Next time he saw Danny and Beth he would sit them down, together, and he would tell them. He could not put it off any longer.

The next morning he cancelled his plans to go over to the Veblen Center and waited at home. Beth came back from school at three o'clock. She stayed in the atrium, but she said little to Todd. She was obviously waiting, too. As the afternoon wore on she became steadily more restless and dejected.

When the sky light bleeding into the atrium began to fade, Todd went across and put his arm around her. "What's wrong, sweet pea?" He might not be able to talk to Beth about Danny, but he could certainly talk to Beth about Beth.

"Expecting somebody who didn't appear?" he went on, when she did not respond.

"Not really." Beth turned to her father and laid her head against his chest. "But I was hoping. Danny said he was going to tell his parents about me today. He told me it might get them really angry. He said he'd come over here if he could, but I shouldn't be surprised or upset if he couldn't make it."

Todd squeezed her to him. "Never mind, Beth. He'll be here tomorrow."

*But maybe not.*

The surge of feeling inside Todd was not sadness or sympathy. It was *relief*. He had overlooked something obvious: Danny Shawner's ELitE family might be just as upset about Danny seeing Beth as Todd was about Beth seeing Danny. If *they* told Danny that ELitE and non-ELitE did not mix, and laid down the law, then Todd's unpalatable chore would be done for him.

He waited with Beth until he felt sure that it was too late for Danny to arrive. Then he went and directed the house monitor to include him on any call to or from Beth. It seemed certain that Danny would try to reach her, and when that happened Todd wanted to speak with both of them.

But Danny did not call. Todd went to bed late, able to relax for the first time in days; because, according to the house monitor, for the past few weeks Danny had always called Beth just before her bedtime, and tonight he had not.

He slept heavily and was jerked to reluctant wakefulness when it was still dark outside, by the insistent voice of the house monitor.

*"An incoming call has been received for Beth Veblen, and has been reported to you according to your instructions. Do you wish to continue to receive calls?"*

"What time is it?" Todd realized that he had been hearing voices in his sleep, and ignoring them.

*"Five-eleven a.m."*

"Patch me in as a listener to the call."  
"That is not possible. The call has already ended. It was not recorded."

Todd lay groggy for another few minutes, wondering what was going on. He was brought fully awake when the house monitor said calmly: "*Compound integrity has been breached. Beth Veblen has left by the front entrance and has failed to re-arm the security system. Should it remain open?*"

"Re-arm." Todd was already out of bed and hurrying into his clothes. "Can you give me a source for the incoming call?"

"That information is not in the general net."

"Use my Inner Circle access code."

"Inner Circle access code activated. The incoming call was from the Ridenour, Columbia, exchange. Do you want the number?"

"No. Give me the address, and tell me the fastest method of travel to get me there. Hard and soft copy outputs. Did Beth ask for any travel instructions?"

"No, she did not."

The call had come from Danny Shawner. Todd was sure of that even before the confirming address appeared on the screen. He grabbed the plastic card output and headed at top speed for the compound exit. Since he had been provided with the fastest way to reach Ridenour Station, Columbia, and Beth had not, there was a good chance that he could be there before her. But suppose that she had made the trip before—who knew how many times—and did not even have to worry about directions?

It was still dark outside, and all public lighting had been powered down for the pre-dawn period. Todd did not try to think about where he was heading. His thoughts were with Beth. She was safe enough physically, anywhere and at any hour. But what had Danny told her, to make her leave the compound at once, without telling anyone, in the middle of the night?

He climbed into one of the cars at the compound exit, closed the door, and slipped in the plastic card. The car started at once, heading rapidly east. After a few minutes Todd could see the faint glimmer of false dawn ahead of him.

They were heading for a part of the county where he had never been before. As the light brightened, Todd could take a good look at his surroundings. Instead of widely spaced and formally structured compounds, open gardenlike developments blended naturally into rolling countryside. When the car turned off the main highway, the signs along the narrow streets were all pictographs, warning or informing in nonverbal messages. The houses on either side were numerous and close-spaced, but somehow they did not seem crowded. They looked peaceful and pleasant, still asleep in the early light.

Todd stared at them, and had the incongruous thought that he liked their looks better than his own compound. Of course, the walls and the security systems of the Veblen Compound were an anachronism anyway, a left-over from the bad times thirty years ago, a relic that Todd had never bothered to take out. But the garden atmosphere

here was appealing. If the Veblen Compound walls were to come down, Beth might like the increased openness, the greater feeling of freedom.

His thoughts dropped back to Earth.

Beth. And this was ELitE country. Todd was an alien here.

"Destination," said the car softly. "*Four-oh-three-three, Ridenour Station.*" They were rolling to a silent halt in front of a rambling structure, mostly underground, with its roof windows surrounded by blooming azaleas, and arrays of tulips and hyacinths growing in beds on the roof itself.

Todd scrambled out as the car door opened. He had not known what he would do if he arrived before Beth, but that decision would not have to be made. He saw her red-and-white checkered blouse, bright among the soft green of tall foliage. She must have ridden the fastest PV slides in the deep basement to get here so soon.

Beth was not alone. She was standing facing a man in a dark shirt and pants, and her right arm was held out, pointing at the steps that led down to the entrance of the house. He was shaking his head. Todd assumed that it was Danny, then realized in the next fraction of a second that it could not be. This was a stranger, bowed in the shoulders, shorter than Danny and with dark hair streaked with grey.

The man turned at the sound of the car door. Todd saw a bewildered, haunted face, with something of Danny in the eyes and cheekbones.

"Mr. Shawner?" Todd groped for the first name. "Arturo Shawner?"

At his voice, Beth broke away from the man and flew to his arms.

"Oh, Daddy." Her voice was breaking, her face red and her eyes swollen. "Daddy."

"You are the father?" The man stared at Todd with a changed expression. "Take her away. We did not ask her to come, we did not invite her into our home. He called her, after the second seizure. But we do not want her here."

"Danny—"

"You are too late." The expression was no longer bewildered. It had found something to hold on to, hostility and hatred. "He has . . . gone. He went very quickly, after the third seizure."

"What happened?"

"I—I struck him." The words forced themselves out in little bursts of sound. "When—he told me—what he had been—doing with her. I did not hit hard—not hard, not hard at all. But—he fell. He fell. And then a seizure." Arturo Shawner glared at Todd. "For God's sake, go. Take her with you. If it had not been for her, I would not—and my Danny . . ."

A woman was emerging from the sunken door of the house, her face hidden within a white cloth. Arturo Shawner straightened up when he saw her, and suddenly his resemblance to his son was uncanny.

"No, Mary. Do not come out." He took Todd by the arm and began to push him roughly away from the house. "Go, both of you. We do not want your kind here, to

feed on our grief." He was urging Todd and Beth into the car. "Leave us *alone*."

"*Destination?*" said the car softly, as Shawner slammed the door.

"Home," said Todd. Beth had her face buried in his jacket. He turned his head as the car started forward. Danny's mother had not retreated, and now she and Arturo Shawner were clinging desperately to each other.

"Beth?" But she would not speak. She shook her head and kept her face hidden against his chest. He noticed that she was holding a piece of paper in her right hand. When he took it from her she did not resist, or even seem to notice. She was crying, in long, dry sobs that came from deep in her chest.

Todd held her close, while with one hand he slowly unfolded the yellow sheet. He had expected a handwritten note of some kind. Instead it was a scrap of computer printout. He read it, slowly, his own mind a cloud of confusion and speculation.

*When I no more can see your face,  
At midnight or at noon,  
I'll find the world a lonely place,  
And leave it soon.*

*Eagles in an empty sky  
Move but never meet;  
My soul will through eternity  
Seek memories sweet.*

*And in my thoughts, when you are gone  
Love itself will linger on.*

Beside the last two lines of the brief poem, the computer, cold and systematic as ever, had added the printed result of its automatic search routine: "These words cannot be copyrighted. They are a close paraphrase of the final two lines of *Music, when soft voices die*, a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)."

Beth wrote poetry. Had she written this, and brought it with her? Or had Danny himself written the lines, and left them for her as he lay dying? It did not matter. If Danny wrote this, he wrote it *for her*.

Danny, bright-eyed and intense, filled with wonder at the world. Danny, dead at seventeen. No need now for Todd to agonize over what he would say to them, or how he would say it. All his energy must go to comforting Beth. Fortunately, that came naturally to him. But there was something else, something that burned and blazed in Todd's mind and would not leave. The car's motor was quiet and the interior compartment soundproof, but he seemed to hear the roaring of engines all the way back home through the waking streets and busy highways.

He led Beth into the compound, handed her over to the home medical unit, and stayed with her until the sedatives and tranquilizers had taken effect. He tucked her into bed with his own hands. After some hesitation he placed the poem on her dressing table. When he was sure that she was asleep he walked slowly back through the house to the atrium.

He sat in his favorite chair, unaware of the passage of time. He was waiting for Laura, but it was no surprise that Gregg Wescott was with her when she arrived. They had returned together from the Neoteen Hilab, and they were both laughing as they came into the room.

At the sight of Gregg's strong, confident face, all Todd's own uncertainties vanished. Todd *knew*. And that knowledge allowed him to speak, to Laura or Gregg or anyone else.

"Beth has been seeing an ELitE," he began. "A young man called Danny Shawner. She met him a few weeks ago."

He did not look at Laura or at Gregg. He went on without giving them time to say anything. "Danny Shawner died this morning. His father said it was the result of a blow. He hit Danny, and later Danny fell down in a seizure, what his father seemed to think was some kind of stroke. But Danny was young and strong and fit, and his father said that he did not hit him hard. A slap on the face or a smack on the head, that wouldn't have killed him—wouldn't even hurt him. Something else caused his seizures."

Todd finally turned to face Gregg Wescott. "I asked you about the inoculation. You told me that it was a standard one. But it wasn't, was it? It was the special one, the one you don't talk about. An Inner Circle inoculation."

Gregg remained quite calm. "Don't pretend, Todd. You knew it. When we first talked about it, I told you we had to protect the Veblen name. You knew what that meant. You knew Shawner was an ELitE."

"We're responsible—I'm responsible."

"Wrong." Gregg came across to where Todd was sitting. He put his hand on Todd's shoulder. "*Shawner* was responsible. The virus is transmitted sexually, and *only* sexually. If he hadn't taken your daughter, hadn't *defiled* your daughter, nothing would have happened to him."

"That sort of inoculation, without our knowledge or approval—"

"I'm sorry, Todd, but it wasn't like that," Gregg glanced at Laura.

"Gregg's right." She came across to stand in front of Todd. "He told me the whole thing, the same day the two of you discussed inoculation. He wasn't betraying you, dear. He just felt that I had to know, and it would be hard for you to tell me. When I heard everything, I agreed with both of you. I told Gregg to go ahead and get you the inoculation kit."

"The danger—"

"Is nonexistent. Beth had her viral protective shot years and years ago, I made sure of that just in case. She's as immune as any of us."

"And if you're thinking of danger from evidence," added Gregg, "there's no sign of the virus ninety minutes after death. That must have passed long since. Do you know when he died?"

"Early this morning. I was there soon after. Beth was there when it actually happened."

"Oh, my God." Laura jerked forward, closer to Todd. "Beth saw the ELitE *die*?"

"I think so. I think she was with him."

"My poor sweet girl. It must have been terrible for her."

"It was awful. She's in her bed now, sedated."

"I have to see if she needs anything. God, I hope she's all right. That damned ELiE. If anything happens to Beth . . ." Laura hurried out of the atrium.

"Poor Laura. She's really upset about this." Gregg wandered across to the central counter. "And I know you are, too. But it's all over now. You both need to look forward, not back."

"Beth is devastated. Totally heartbroken."

"Of course she is." Gregg was busy, pouring three hefty drinks. "Beth's upset because she's a sweet, caring person. But hey, think positive. She's young, she'll get over this fast. She'll meet other boys. Just you wait, in another few months she'll fall for somebody else—not an ELiE, thank God—and you'll never hear one word more about Danny Shawner."

He came back and handed one glass to Todd. "Just now I'm more worried about you, buddy. You don't look good. Here, have a go at this."

"It was a terrible thing."

"I'll never disagree with that. But it was necessary. Civilization doesn't come cheap and easy, ever. If you want things to go on being good for everybody, you have to be ready to pay the price. We normally don't think that way, but today just happened to be your turn to pay."

Gregg went back to the counter and picked up another filled glass. "I'm going to give this to Laura; she can probably use it right now as much as you can. Stay

here with your drink. I'll be back in a few minutes to tell you what Laura showed me in the Neoteen Hilab—really interesting stuff. Maybe you ought to try to make a bigger investment there after all."

He hurried off toward Beth's suite. Todd was alone. He sipped from the glass, grimaced at the strength of the drink, and then took a big gulp.

*Eagles in an empty sky,  
Move but never meet.*

It was bad, but it could have been much worse. Suppose that Beth had become pregnant with an ELiE's child? Suppose that Shawner had infected her with some strange ELiE disease—officially there were no natural diseases left in the world, but there were always rumors. Worst of all, suppose that *Beth* had died.

But she hadn't. He had protected her, and now his little girl was safely tucked up in her own bed. She would be sad when she awoke, sure she would. But that just made it so much more important for Todd and Laura to think positively, to find ways of cheering her up over the next few weeks.

They had a wonderful, special daughter; and she was going to grow up smart, beautiful and loved, in a wonderful, beautiful world.

He raised his glass. *Here's to you, Beth, and a long, happy future. And here's to me as well.*

By the time that Gregg returned to the atrium, Todd was full of exciting plans for Beth and had poured himself another drink. ♦



"I appreciate your skepticism. But I'm sure my reading will impress you . . . once I find a few bumps."

# The Tubes of Baal-Ashteroth

Phillip C. Jennings

"Lo, Korath dances in her wickedness, her loins embrace unclean things, for the wicked woman and her daughters they ravish the herds of Tob and Geshur, and drink"

As Hezer inked his angry pen the door crashed open and daylight flooded in.

"The worst! First my cattle and now this! The iron men of Queen Korath are here out of season! They come by the orchard path! Flee! Did I not tell you this would happen? They come for you, it means nothing else! Here, I have some loaves; wrap them in your cloak! Go now! Oh, man, you would be prophet and denounce affairs like your cousin in Israel, and now—no, no, not that way! Where's your stick? Go!—What's that? Your latest rant? Have you no sense in that wobbly old head?"

Anna grabbed the parchment and thrust it into the flame of the prophet's lamp. Until this moment Hezer had merely watched his niece whirlwind around him, blinking in astonishment, but now he seized the smoking end and fought to win back his prose. The two struggled, each surprised at the other's strength. Meanwhile



Illustration by Les Dorscheid



Captain Pezziah came up and rattled the gate on its loose hinges. "I come for Hezer the Danite," he cried.

"Not here!—He's not here!" Anna gasped.

"I am too!" Hezer thundered. He cleared his throat and rummaged his tongue around to lubricate his voice, but by then Queen Korath's helmeted minions had pushed inside. Two soldiers pinned his arms. Hezer took breath to roar again. "What injustice is this, brother of Gad-Gilead? She that squats upon a false throne, the Whore of Syria—"

"That'll be enough!" Pezziah interrupted. He grabbed the parchment, wadded it into a ball, and shoved it in the old man's mouth. "Now, the truth is this—you've been invited to the Queen's court. If that makes the piss run down your legs I don't blame you, and it'll be piss down *my* legs if we aren't back in Aphek sometime tomorrow."

"Ujh um e ahhch ah."

"Excuse me?" Pezziah pulled out the parchment plug.

"Cesspit of debaucheries, mistress of whoredoms, sow whose chin runs red with—"

"Much as I thought," the captain said, and crammed it back in again. "Woman, fetch some lad out of yon village to come with us, and we shall send him home with the news of this traitor's final disposition. We would not have you live in uncertainty, but work quickly. Do not press upon our kindness, for we have little time."

Anna ran this errand, after which the soldiers hiked off with Hezer indignantly in tow. In time they forded the Yarmuk River, wetted to their calves as they crossed a debatable frontier. When Solomon died and his empire divided into the Three Kingdoms, Gilead extended far to the south—as it still did, though presently as a province of Israel. Nowadays people talked of the "Two Kingdoms," Israel and Judah, because the Gaddite land was reduced to a tiny sliver. Worse, tiny Geshur was ruled by a woman.

Worse yet, south of the Yarmuk it was not always possible to keep King Omri's tax collectors from their rounds, under the impression that this half of Korath's realm was actually part of Israel.

*And so it might be.* Hezer's forehead wrinkled into crablike lines of ferocity. *If my words rouse King Omri to muster against Ben-Hadad and the abominations of Damascus, ubo gird the pandered loins of Aphek with Syrian armor—Ab, what a phrase! I have to remember that one.*

But now it was time to stop his musings, for the path climbed, and the westering sun burned hotly on Hezer's bald pate. A prideful stiffness was inconsistent with keeping his footing. By the time they reached the Heaps of Abomination he walked head down, like a beaten man.

It was the Canaanite custom to throw stones onto the Heaps as they passed, an offering to one of their baals. In time they had grown into small hills and gave shade. Would the Lord Yahweh grow angry if Hezer rested here? But the soldiers decided for him, and tugged him off his feet. Pezziah pulled the soggy parchment from his mouth. "Have you heard? Queen Korath has two new prophetesses. A strange pair, and curious to see you."

"Woe that Geshur should fall into the hands of witches," Hezer croaked. "Captain, would you but join the faithful party, Yahweh might anoint even you."

Peziah doffed his helmet and shook out his locks. "King Omri has pronounced me outlaw for collecting taxes south of the river. My lot is with the Queen."

"You might be King," Hezer whispered.

"By marrying which daughter? None could be satisfied by one man, though the youths of Aphek strive nightly to prove otherwise."

Hezer's prominent larynx bobbed as he swallowed. Nervously he bent closer. "Not by marriage, but in the manner by which the Kings of Israel replace each other."

"Murder? You are a bloody one. But then, you prophets of the baals—"

"Yahweh Elohim is not a baal!" Hezer forgot all discretion. "Better to slay one wicked woman than throw live babies into the fiery mouths of perdition!"

"The prophetesses say likewise. Henceforth Baal-Asheroth requires no sacrifices of children or even animals, but only of flowers and scented oils."

Taken aback, Hezer frowned uncertainly. "A baal served with trifles promises trifles in return. Nevertheless the offense to the Almighty remains the same."

Peziah shrugged. "We pass the vineyards of Ebnerash on the way to Aphek. His son has put the old inn into repair. On the lintel you shall read some interesting new edicts."

Hezer remained unsure how this statement connected to their argument, until their party completed another upward hike and stood near Ebnerash's door. Here the old prophet bent to mumble, but his voice carried, and those soldiers who could not read listened for his reaction.

"Her Greatness Queen Korath—great of greed!—requires the attendance of all the Elders of Geshur to hear a discussion of the following ideas on the last day of Tammüz, in Aphek, at the threshing floor before the West Gate.

"That those who pay taxes to the Queen should have the right to elect a—what is this? Something out of Egypt? Par-leeya-menth?

"That all children should have the chance to learn letters and numbers. Yes, and to enter into covenants and fight battles too, I expect. . . .

" . . . that this hurtful custom of hacking foreskins ought to be stopped." Hezer's color rose dangerously. ". . . freedom of opinion about religious matters . . . no man shall have more than one wife . . . practitioners of medicine to be licensed. Estates passed to eldest son go to the daughter if she be older. The rules of divorce apply equally to men and women. . . . Mandatory use of the new birth control magics after three children . . ."

Hezer sat in the dust. "She has gone mad! Tell me, does she tear her clothes and roll in the streets?"

Peziah hauled him up by his robe. "Do not tread too heavily upon my patience, old man. Tearing and rolling about is a specialty of you prophets, nor were you summoned to Aphek to meddle in the affairs of those who have been loyal all this time."

"Then tell me why you stole me from the land of Tob."

"Because you are King Omri's advocate and spy, by accident of birth not a man of Israel, except as you rouse your harsh party of Yahweh worshippers against your rightful Queen. Fool! What would you gain if you won? Do not the true prophets of Israel defame Omri as keenly as you throw calumny upon Korath? Bah! You rejoice in the bellowing of your voice. But now the prophetesses say it may be useful if you run bellowing to King Omri. Enough of talk. We shall rest here, and finish our travels on the morrow."

So they did, the village boy fetching what he could to make the old man comfortable. But Hezer saved his voice against Korath and her witches, saying nothing from sunset to sunrise except a few maledictory prayers. Night passed. Eyes reddened by wine, Pezziah's soldiers mustered shortly after daybreak, grabbed Hezer's bonds, and continued the uphill climb, which gentled as they reached the brushy heights on which Aphek was built, some ways further to the east.

Cities dotted the world from Cush to distant Hoddu. Traders plodded between them, pestered by nagging requisitions at every stop—or they took to hard wilderness routes, where havens were days apart, and thus boldly eliminated any number of middlemen. For that reason wild Aphek had grown from a huddle of huts, independent because Ben-Hadad was unwilling that King Omri should have it, and vice versa.

A buffer between Syria and Israel, Korath's capital pretended beyond its limited means, its poor walls never completely in repair. Its few towers rose from a haze of incense-smoke, for the local industry was the manufacture of balms.

Entering this sickly-sweet atmosphere, Captain Pezziah's troop fell behind a six-ass merchant, and ahead of a goatherd, overtaking occasional women and children and—*men?*—bending under harvest loads of aromatic wood.

Men doing women's work! Hezer's face tightened, but the muscles of his jaws worked quietly until they passed a guardpost. Here Captain Pezziah was waved through, but by what? A fair hand, delicate features beneath that helmet—it took Hezer a hundred paces to realize that he'd seen a woman spearman.

Folly of follies! All the certainties of life turned on their heads! "Does your queen think to quench the anger of the Lord beneath the wide ocean of her offenses?" the prophet roared, unable to control his fury. His voice turned shrill. "I ask you, is everyone blind to Korath's madness?"

Traffic stopped before the city gates. Hezer turned to address this bottlenecked audience. "Woe to Aphek, for God's wrath is a fire, and Korath has added such a bundle to the flames, greased in her own fou—*Ouwmmph!*"

"Free speech?" said the captain, clapping his strong hand over Hezer's mouth. An odd remark, and Hezer's eyes rolled to find—yes! One of the princesses, out on a promenade on the city walls. Four servants carried the canopy that shielded her painted skin from the sun's rays.

Buxom but short, the kohl-eyed princess made a contrast to the woman at her side, a monster taller by a head

than the guards around her, so tall that the machicolations of the gate reached barely to her waist. Korath's daughter wore her beddizened raiment stylishly, allowing glimpses of her embonpoint, but this yellow-haired bean-pole seemed uncomfortable in her ineptly fastened robes. "There are limits to free speech. If he creates witnesses to any libels or threats, his case will go the worse."

"Behold the Prophetess Linda," Pezziah said, removing his hand. "This, you have guessed, is Omri's pet ranter, Hezer the Danite."

"Pleased to meet you," said Linda. "I suppose we're in the same line of work, though competitors, sorry to say. Propaganda, public relations, keeping up the old morale. Hard times for you Yahwehists now. And they'll get worse, but you'll struggle on. Gotta give you credit . . . Captain, bring him in. Beverly and I will interview him in the Temple of Truth."

"—Temple of Who?"

"*Their name for Ashteroth*," Pezziah whispered. "*The Goddess enters the flesh of different heroines at different times, and thus begets a confusion of names: Kubebe, Inanna, Ishtar, Susan-Biyantboni . . .*"

As the captain spoke they pushed through the gate and into the streets of Aphek. A burly woman with a fringe of graying hair waved them by, clasping a shingle to her bosom—no, a writing board. A woman scribe!

"Ha! Goats," she cawed, and closed in on the herdsmen behind them. She wagged her stylus. "An ecological disaster. The Goddess will see you provided with something more suitable—six, eight—they destroy the forests, you know. A thousand years ago Canaan exported ivory, because elephants ranged hereabouts. Here's your chit—yes, Pezziah? I'm busy. Take him to headquarters, like Linda said."

As they left her behind, the captain gave Hezer a nudge. "That one was Beverly."

The whatevers of their course made progress into the heart of Aphek a long and winding business, but at last they reached a forecourt shared by both temple and palace. "What's that? An idol?"

Pezziah laughed. "One of a thousand novelties. The polished metal reflects the rays of the sun, concentrating them to cook one's meat. Can you imagine wood ever being so scarce that it would profit a man to make such a thing, which is useless against the chills of night? But the prophetesses say that unless we change our ways we will ruin this land, and then the balms of Gilead will be just a legend."

Curdled air boiled up from the face of the cooker, and Hezer's brows furrowed in involuntary alarm. "They are prophetesses, then."

"They even compliment Yahweh for forbidding the pig, which roots up the soil. But they would eliminate goats too."

"None of this has reached my ears in Tob. So many changes!" Hezer and the soldiers gave the dolorous artifact a wide miss, skirting along a shopkeepers' arcade until his escorts reached the twin pillars of the prophetesses' temple.

"We'll wait here," the captain said, and thrust the

would-be prophet ahead into the dark interior. Here the group stumbled over benches and bodies, until the crowd of worshippers made room for Hezer and his flanking guards to sit.

High on the far wall, visions flickered and glowed: "... length of the stick's shadow at midday is very slight at the cataracts of the Nile, while further north at Alexandria ..."

"Al Eskandriya? Where's that?" Hezer blurted.

*"Hush! Be quiet, will you?"*

Instead of answering, the disembodied voice talked through these interruptions, prating in a foreign accent about ships and shadows on the moon. The images were bewitching, and—surprise!—they were used as evidence toward a novel conclusion: the earth beneath their feet was a vast round ball!

Foolishness! Dancing colors in the dark, a grand interest in theories that could have no effect on people's lives. Yet how startling to run off declaiming on these matters, carrying a vain buzz in one's head which had nothing to do with double taxes or Yahweh's justice. Hezer's companion-lad watched, and his mouth fell open in awe. Hezer reached to jostle the boy's shoulder, and was pleased to see him wake from the trance and nod in gratitude.

A short while later the invisible voice went silent. Complex music played unsteadily, and deformed letters rose across the light. Lamp in hand, the Prophetess Linda hurried from a side chamber. "Friends, I hope today has been an introduction to a new type of thinking. Simple phenomena, like the wandering of planets across the sky, or the fall of an apple, can be used to open the doors to vast knowledge. At our next service I'll show you a yet more wonderful episode!"

The crowd gabbled and dispersed. Had Linda addressed him before they were all gone, Hezer would have had an audience for his answer, but instead she potttered about with an anvil-shaped device; somehow the source of what they'd just seen.

The doors to the temple opened and shut, accompanied by thumpings of wood on stone, and bursts of daylight. With time on his hands, Hezer composed his thoughts. When Linda finally said, "What did you think of that?" he was ready with his complaint:

"You draw the attachment of the people of Aphek by things that have no connection with your baal. I see nothing to do with Ashteroth here."

Linda shrugged. "Our false connections are an improvement on yours. Future priests will burden Yahweh with theories that the Earth is flat, and was made in seven days. Have you heard of the Five Books of Moses?"

Back and forth the village lad looked, absorbed a dialog seemingly for his benefit. He shifted focus when the latch rattled behind Hezer's back.

"Now, Linda, they haven't been compiled yet, and we're a long way from Jerusalem." Beverly shut the door behind her, and its oxhide hinges squeaked. She scowled at their noise and peered ahead into the gloom. "What do you expect from this guy? A debate? You going to convert *everybody*?"

"Wouldn't you like to prove those church scholars wrong?" was Linda's answer. "Suppose he *does* know some rudiments of scripture—"

"Right now we need a good old-fashioned fire-breathing male chauvinist asshole, so forget about anything else. Hezer, what do you think of Queen Korath's army?"

Hezer snorted at Beverly's jest. "A few sots guarding the city walls. Just enough to plunder Tob and scurry back across the Yarmuk. Yes, and women, too!"

"With this force we shall change history, or else patriarchy will perpetuate itself in three major world religions," Beverly expounded. "Our last chance to avoid thousands of years of male insensitivity to the environment; of slavery and oppression! But the, uh, Goddess has given us gifts of wonderful power, and tomorrow we challenge the garrison at Kedesh, hoping to goad Israel so that King Omri will oblige us and march stupidly to battle, a victim of blundering male hormones."

"With his thousands of men? I see where Korath gets her madness," Hezer responded.

"You shall see Korath herself, if we can work you in between her amours," Linda spoke. "After all, it wouldn't be fair to exile you without a legal trial."

"But I am to be exiled? A sham of justice, everyone mounding practiced lines like priests at their rites!"

Hezer repeated his complaint within the hour, standing bound before the Queen of Geshur. "These mussels need more garlic," she answered, and then looked up.

"You object to being twice taxed. Complain to King Omri, who has no business east of the Jordan River!"

Hezer thrust out his chin. "Before the next full moon Omri will rend Geshur and turn Aphek into a nullity. Rains will wash clean the dunghills of your excesses, and the whirlwinds of Yahweh's righteousness will scatter all that you have gathered—"

"Is that enough to hang him under the New Enlightenment?" Korath turned to Beverly. "You said we could do just about anything under martial law."

Beverly bent, and whispered in Korath's ear.

"You shall-remain under-restraint until-we-take Kedesh," the monarch repeated as coached, "after-which it-is-our-will that you never-enter-our-territory again."

Beverly straightened, and the Queen spoke on in more natural tones. "Where this leaves you after we conquer Egypt and Assyria we can barely imagine, but let this be a lesson in good manners for the others of your faction. Well, why are you standing there? Go! Pez-ziah, wave in our dancing men, and warn that fool Cypriot cook to stop watering the wine."

Hezer was made to back out of the audience chamber. Here Linda took up his ropes. "A shame to stick you in the dungeons for a single night. We want to keep you healthy. In fact ..."

Without finishing her sentence, she tugged him off, back to the temple, Pezziah delegating a soldier to keep an eye on things. At this destination she rolled up his sleeve, and took up a thing. She pressed it to his shoulder, and Hezer felt the sting of a dozen bees.

"Owl!"

The messenger lad from Hezer's village saw Linda's resolve to do likewise with him, and backed into shadow, shaking his head.

Beverly stepped from the opposite background. "What now? An evening debate on religious henotheism? Linda, your head runs to abstractions, but this geezer is basically one of your right-wing tax weirdos, like that Proposition 13 guy in California."

"Your words shift from meaning to nonsense," Hezer interrupted. "You make everything solid heave like seas in a storm, and if a man were to climb a mountain, growing prosperous in accordance with Yahweh's covenant, and he were unhappy enough to live in Korath's realm, that mountain would be a sea-mountain, the crest of a wave. Like a wave it would sink, and his striving would be for naught."

"I think I get it. You're defending rigid custom," Linda answered. "Women slaves to men, goats where goats have always been. But we say women should be equal to men. Ours is no random madness; we've got principles for what we do. More principles than you, if truth be told."

"And by these principles my niece is impoverished! A widow robbed of her cattle."

"By King Omri," Linda said, almost apologetically. "It takes two monarchs to double-tax. The Tob situation will straighten out after the victory. Come now, look. See these things? Crates of weapons, oiled and ready. Beverly, hold that lamp close. Let Omri's spy feast his eyes. Tomorrow he'll learn what he's gawking at. Got an eyeful? Good. Let's find you supper and a bed, and then see about those horses."

"What about loosening my ropes?" Hezer asked, more concerned for his chafed skin than for the uninspiring sight of closely wrapped dark tubes.

Beverly exchanged glances with Linda, and shot a protective look at their army. "Tomorrow," she promised.

Old men sleep lightly, as do those imprisoned in unfamiliar surroundings. Hezer's eyes opened to whispers, but open or not there was no light in this antechamber, just the sound of women in the next room, women who seemed to have spent years immersed in such noise that even whispering they spoke too loud.

*"—just as bloody as anyone else of these times. Remember the Assyrians and their mountains of severed heads! If we give in to our qualms it's all over. Pezziah will know us for soft-headed fools."*

*"I know, I know. And ultimately we'll save lives, once our Empire stretches widely enough to enforce peace. But still, to act as if we enjoyed the idea—have you ever seen someone killed? I just hope I don't throw up."*

Next morning the prophetesses were as good as their promise. They led Hezer squinting into the light of dawn, then spoke to his guard, who removed his bonds and hoisted him into a two-horse chariot. "You ride in style today!" Linda shouted, hiking her skirts and stepping up into the next vehicle in line.

Queen Korath's six war-carts crowded the forecourt

surrounding the prophetess's metal cooker. With the crack of a whip the first whirled off, Captain Pezziah at the reins while two subordinates hugged an elaborate tube of sizable dimensions. Then the second chariot began to roll. "What about me?" cried the village boy. He stretched up his arms.

"Your job is done," Hezer answered. "Go home and tell Anna. Korath intends I make haste to Omri's capital, and notify him of the catastrophe of Kedesah." His face contorted into a rare smile. "A catastrophe to *whom*?"

At this moment his vehicle lurched into motion.

Noise and clatter, six old chariots, fifteen soldiers—by no means a martial spectacle. Hezer expected that the expedition would be joined by a muster of footmen out past the West Gate, yet who among Korath's pampered bravos was up to jogging all the way to the borders of Israel?

In fact, none. Without reinforcements the raiders sped on, aided by the lay of the land, which trended downhill. Before the sun was at zenith they reached the steepest part of their descent, and zigzagged into the valley of the Jordan, just north of the Yarmuk confluence. Here they grazed their horses and ate bread and curds, while the prophetesses wove among them, rehearsing lessons in the use of Ashteroth's outlandish gifts.

Neither soldiers nor horses were keen to get moving again. Beverly urged them on. "Come, it's just a few miles. Cross the river and you're practically there!"

"Exactly!" Hezer rumbled. "Woe to a soldier's widow—"

"Somebody shut him up. Captain, let's roll 'em out!"

Hundreds of paces later the road's ruts led into the Jordan. Korath's chariots had no trouble fording the river, at which point Pezziah recited a *pro forma* diatribe, declaring war against Israel for the punishment of Omri's offenses. At a distance two laundrywomen caught snatches of his language and bundled off. Exhilarated by this triumph, the captain lashed his horses and tore south and west, raising dust as the road rose higher and dryer.

Four other chariots added to that cloud of dust, which settled only as Hezer's trailing vehicle caught up to the rest, now halted at a middle distance from the gates of Kedesah.

"Queen Korath demands your surrender!" Pezziah shouted.

Had his challenge carried? With insulting leisuressness Omri's soldiers took to their posts, asked the captain to repeat his claims, and debated whether to close the door, glancing at the parked chariots and scratching their heads. "... some stray cow ... ". "... gotten her dander up ... "

"Give me that!" Pezziah reached and swung a tube of metal to his shoulders. The thing barked. Hezer stared, puzzled by the satisfaction on Pezziah's face. It barked again. The prophet saw Korath's soldiers gazing off toward Kedesah, and turned.

Amazing. Those same Israelite soldiers milled at high speed, dragging one of their number out of sight, then slamming the gate closed. "Fool!" a man shouted from the garrison walls. "You risk war! We have tolerated your den of perdition—"

Another bark and he dropped; to Hezer's failing eyes it seemed his face turned to flames of blood before he fell. "Ready the mortars!" Captain Pezziah shouted. "Don't scuttle like rats; their archers are hit-or-miss at this range. Slow down! Do as we practiced, and one at a time until we find the angle."

Clearly the bigger the tubes of Baal-Ashteroth, the louder their thunder. Deafened by a sudden boom, Hezer backed off. Captain Pezziah looked toward Kedesh and shook his head as the whistle faded. "Too far! What say we back up?"

His men jogged happily rearward. Chariot banners whipped in the breeze, skittish horses neighed and pulled at their tethers. At random places Israelite arrows fell short. Pezziah turned to the prophet, eyes gleaming with a killer lust that transformed his face. "If you want to watch a fortress's doom, watch from yon heights. This is where our courses part, and from here on expect no mercy. Hurry now, run! Be off!"

Hezer ran. Behind him he heard two more boom-whistles, thirty or forty breaths apart. He turned to see smoke rising inside the Israelite garrison. At this point the land rose sharply, and he scrambled toward a bluff.

A fourth boom. Hezer turned again. More smoke, and now the lick of flames. A fifth boom and a sixth in hurried sequence. The old prophet thought he heard screams. The gate-tower showed oddly through the billowing haze, its profile half of what it should be.

Suddenly, a drumroll of many booms, and all was obliterated. Hezer climbed out of the valley of the Jordan, now and again turning back to see a great column of smoke.

The garrison of Kedesh was no more, and Queen Korath was no longer a border harlot with absurd pretensions.

It took the rest of that day and two more before Hezer reached the mountain of Samaria. He croaked his message at the gates in a weary whisper. After a short while he was escorted inside.

Courtiers scrambled for the remnants of a feast, a happy meal now ruined. King Omri rose sullenly from the head of the table, a man of powerful broad build, his curly black hair still glistening from a recent administration of scented oil. "What is this now?" he said, grabbing Hezer's robe and pulling him close. "Queen Korath? That bitch? Lies! By all the baals from here to Tarshish—"

"No lies, Majesty! I would not tell a lie you could prove against me. But she means to goad you—"

"Then it will please her to know that I am goaded! Hey, all you within my hearing! Muster every one of my iron men, and every chariot, for I see the hand of Ben-Hadad, that usurper of Damascus, in all this work—or do you say otherwise?"

Hezer upended a jug of water, drinking and washing his face at the same time. Slightly revived, he spoke: "I say the abomination named Ashteroth has given the queen such tubes of metal that fifteen men could destroy thousands. Our hope cannot lay in Israel's numbers, but in the strength of the Almighty."

"Yes, but *which* almighty?" Omri spat out the words. "Tubes?"

"Big and little, with handles. Six chariots, and many tubes, and many more back in Aphek in the prophetheses' temple. In less than an hour they laid Kedesh waste with fire and smoke."

Omri digested this. "We shall see whether her force advances or retreats," he said more thoughtfully. "Those who are ready ride with me to—um—Endor. That town will be our rallying point."

"My Lord, as I am loyal I would tell you more," Hezer interrupted. "I would tell you of Linda and Beverly, and their principles and edicts—"

"So you shall, while we move off to meet our enemies."

And so Hezer got no rest at all, until his legs folded and he slumped to the bouncing floor of the royal chariot. King Omri's horses cantered at an unflagging pace, and somewhere beyond the range of his circumscribed view the prophet heard the crack of whips, the rumble of wheels, the shouts of officers.

Omri's driver drew rein, and they halted at the crest of a height. The king helped Hezer to his feet. "Talk more," he demanded. "You say they destroyed Kedesh; they didn't take it."

"I thought I said both things. Where lies the difference?"

"Go! Make haste!" Omri waved his trailing host onward, then turned back to face the old man. "Let's say they march from place to place, and challenge each in turn. Would our cities surrender to a small band of charioteers? Hardly! So in every case they must prove themselves—at least until their reputation outruns them."

"That means they must *destroy* each post, reducing it to rubble. Very well then, *where do they spend the night?* Fifteen soldiers, deep in hostile country!"

"Ah. So every night—"

"Every night they must consider how to defend themselves, so few against our thousands. And you tell us they must aim their tubes for them to work. Therefore the night robs them of targets. Our only concern is that they've anticipated this problem, and have magic to protect them."

Hezer considered what he knew of Baal-Ashteroth's gifts. "I have never seen—no, better yet. Her metal cookers work only in daylight. It may be she has no powers except when the sun is high."

"But would they be so stupid?" King Omri frowned.

"As you are a man, they expect *you* to be stupid. You will assemble your army, march forth in a mass, and be an easy target."

"I think not," Omri said. He climbed a rock and stared eastward. "Endor just ahead. Our pace is good. We shall keep our ears open for the sound of tube-thunders, and then distribute our forces. We shall fight like Gideon of yore, cunningly from the bushes, only this time the numbers are on our side."

Omri climbed down again, and his eyes narrowed in thought. "But meanwhile, to put them off their guard, would you be my messenger? Would you carry my words to the fools of Ashteroth?"

"I am exiled. Pezziah's last words were threatening ones."

"But now you come in our name, bearing a challenge. Everything they hope for, a daytime battle against a king heedless of strategy. And as you speak, see how their strength is disposed, and whether their spirits are high or low."

"... I say we should turn back. Does it matter whether we destroy Israel here or near the Jordan?"

"Hush." Beverly raised her hand against Captain Pezziah's complaint and peered off to the west. "Who goes there?"

Hezer's words carried thinly on the wind. "I come with a message."

"Who? Is that you? *It's that old prophet!* Did you get to King Omri?"

As Beverly spoke Linda and Pezziah rose and moved from the campfire. "Hezer? What are you doing here?"

Hezer trudged close through rubble and brush, stopping often for breath, his eyes darting actively right and left. "King (puff, puff) Omri has mustered his army before the town of Endor, and challenges (puff, puff) you to battle tomorrow, an hour after sunrise."

"Quite the gentleman to warn us," Beverly responded.

"And if he's not there when we show up, are we to halt our invasion to wait for him?" Linda mocked. "I say on to his capital."

Hezer turned and started to hike off. "Hey, where are you going?" Pezziah complained.

"You have the king's message."

"Wait now. We might have something to say to him," Pezziah answered. "Ladies?"

"Can't think of a thing," Beverly said. "Let him go."

Hezer walked two hundred paces, then scrambled behind a low wall, all that remained of a village store-room. "They seem deaf to your army's noise," he whispered. "And not the least troubled by their situation. There are paired men in four places on the perimeter, but the important people are still warming their loaves close to the fire."

"Then soon, soon, soon," came the king's answer.

Shadows pooled and lengthened, the sun set, the west lost its lurid colors, and the first stars began to shine.

The early night was filled with clinks, scuffling and other suppressed noises, until finally Omri lost patience.

"Have at them!" he shouted. "Arrows, arrows!"

There was a vast roar, followed by the ragged music of a thousand bows. Then, *\*BOOM\**—to the dismay of the Israelite host a stream of light shot up into the sky and exploded into daytime luminescence. Tubes rattled faster than ears could hear, and archers toppled—but a thousand shafts were already airborne. All that was required was that they reach their targets. Before the light dropped from the heavens, the tubes of Baal-Ashteroth spoke no more.

The groans of the injured made sleep impossible for the rest of that night. At sunrise the forces of King Omri mustered and followed a trail of devastation eastward, reaching Kedesh and making it their camp. Next day

they crossed the Jordan. Omri recited the words of annexation. "Now, the question is, should we go on? You say there are many more tubes in the temple of Baal-Ashteroth, and this time those who wield them will have the protection of walls."

"But not the protection of courage," Hezer answered. "Not Korath nor her simpering daughters, and their best soldiers are dead."

"It is difficult to know which course is best. What is that boy doing up there?"

Hezer squinted. "He's waving us on. Could it be? I know that lad! He wants us to climb the bluffs."

"A trap?" A mix of emotions crossed King Omri's face. "Let us take it as a sign, and make our advance."

Halfway up the hill the royal chariot encountered the lad as he bounded downward. "I did it!" the boy shouted. "She's gone! No more taxes!"

"What?" Hezer and Omri spoke simultaneously.

The boy answered Hezer, shooting occasional glances at the king. "After you bid me go home I chose to disobey. I meant to prove the folly of those who whore unrighteously after Baal-Ashteroth. So I lingered in the city of Aphek, stealing bread by day, and waiting for a dark night. But the first time I got the focus wrong, and nothing happened. The angle has to be just right, see? And I did it. I moved the face of Ashteroth's cooker with exact calculation, and the next morning when the sun grew strong, it concentrated heat on an awning by the shopkeepers' arcade. Yes, and it caught fire, but by then I was far distant, near the West Gate, where all I could hear were the shouts of alarm."

He shuddered. "And it was good that I fled, because—forgive me if I think my poor effort had something to do with it, as if I'd made a burnt offering, a sacrifice to invoke Almighty Yahweh—"

"Get on with it," King Omri commanded.

"My tale is beyond words! The wrath of Yahweh against the abominations of Ashteroth! The thunders that shook the city of Aphek! How high the flames leapt, and how the stones flew! I was among the first to flee the city, but by no means the last, and from my vantage I saw Korath and her daughters squeeze their way out of a bolt-hole far from the walls, their palace a flaming ruin!"

"When was this?" asked the King.

"Just yesterday," the boy answered. "They minced north, complaining at each other, and shaking grit out of their sandals."

"On foot?" Omri grinned. "Without horses I doubt they've left Geshur. We can catch Korath, and be done with queens and witchcraft!"

"And double taxes," Hezer added.

"Yes." Omri turned thoughtful. "In fact, a reward is in order, perhaps . . . a seven-year remission for your village? Would that please you?"

Smiles lit up the faces of the old man and the boy of Tob. And thus Hezer's adventure would have had the happiest possible ending, vindicating the laws of Yahweh and restoring his niece Anna to prosperity—but as it turned out they would have been wiser to get the king's promise in writing. ♦



# Night Calls



## Katharine Eliska Kimbriel

I wasn't there when Papa killed the wolf. But then, girls usually aren't allowed to hunt them.

This was an ongoing argument in our household, the hunting thing, and that night was no different. As always, I lost—promises to stay back, demonstrations of stealth, even stories of bravery while wringing chicken necks—nothing worked. Papa may boast that I'm eleven going on forty, but I'm the only daughter; that means burping babies and grinding wheat instead of fun things like tracking critters.

It was worse when Dolph and Josh came back, laughing and shouting, covered with blood, stumbling over their words as they both tried to tell Momma what had happened. I was stirring the soup when they came in, and kept my back to them while they told their story.

"—And then when we chased him out of Farand's sheep pen—"

"First we had to send for the doctor, for his little girl—"

"Boys, you're bleeding!" Momma finally said weakly, lifting a kettle of hot water from a pot hook swinging above the burning logs.

"It's just sheep's blood, Momma, don't worry," Josh said quickly, brushing at his

Illustration by Ussanne Lake

coat and starting upstairs. "That ol' wolf only got a few snaps off before Papa ran him through with his spear."

I couldn't resist a smile; Josh's voice always squeaked when he got excited. He might have two years on me, but I'm a lot older than he is.

"Papa was great. Everyone else was millin' around swinging torches at it, but Papa just charged right in. Stuck that ash spear right through the wolf and pinned him to the ground." Dolph got to the heart of the story, as always. "He thrashed a long time," Dolph added thoughtfully, moving to the basin of water Momma poured for him. "Snagged a few people, but nothin' too bad. He sure chewed that little girl up early on, though."

"Never heard of a wolf going after a person," I muttered, giving the soup another swish before moving to pull Papa's wine crock from the ashes.

"Shows you haven't heard everythin', doesn't it?" Josh hollered down from the loft.

"I haven't, either," Dolph started, taking my part like he always did.

"She's right," came Papa's voice. We all looked up, and there he was, standing at the door, dark stains blotching his worn clothes. "Wolves don't usually bother people. That one might've been sick. You boys get some sundew infusion from your momma and pour it all over your arms and legs. I saw you touching its mouth—didn't you think? You know animals carry rabies in their spit."

"We didn't get nipped, Papa," Dolph protested. "We were careful."

"How about the cuts and scratches you got working in the field today?"

Well, Dolph didn't have an answer for that, of course, so Momma made me steep some sundew. She practically made them bathe in it, but they were acting like it was nothing, and not scrubbing very hard.

When I finally brought Papa his wine, I couldn't resist asking what he'd done with the wolf.

"Strung it up by the leg in a tree, darling," he said, sipping slowly on the warm liquid. "The coat's owed to the kill, so I'll get it tomorrow."

"Can I help?" Stupid to ask, I knew, but I wanted to help so bad.

Papa studied me over the rim of his cup, his blue eyes clear in the soft light. "A lot of blood and gore, skinning a wolf," he said finally.

"I'm not afraid of a dead wolf," I declared.

"Bet a live one woulda spooked you," came Josh's scornful voice as he stomped down the ladder.

"Not Allie," Dolph said quickly, smiling at me.

I grinned back at him and then scowled at Josh. "I'm not scared of no wolf! At least not with a spear by me." Turning back to Papa, I added under my breath: "There's lots of things scarier than an old wolf."

"Any' wolf, Allie, not 'no' wolf." Papa's words were gentle. He didn't scold the boys much, but he always corrected me. He smiled then, and reached to tug on one of my braids. "Ripe as wheat, you are, child, and not just your long locks. You can help me skin the wolf, if you do your chores first—"

"Oh, I will! I will!" I nearly upset the wine, tossing my

arms around him, but Papa just laughed. Momma started in right away, of course, but he waved her off.

"Child's old enough to help with the pelts this winter, Garda. No sense waiting till the snow flies. She'll be fine with me, and Dolph's old enough to supervise the harvest."

I danced back to the soup pot, and when Papa told the boys he needed them in the fields, not watching him and me skin a varmint, well, I'm sure I started floating. Let Josh watch little Ben and Joe! I was gonna skin me a wolf.

The sunrise was patched like a red 'n' gold quilt, but I didn't pay it no mind. I was up in the dark, collecting eggs by feel and setting the milk out to wait the cream rising. Momma shooed me away and said she'd get it—her way of apologizing for last night. She doesn't like things like wolves and bears; that sort of thing scares her. But she doesn't want to make me frightened for no reason—I heard her tell a neighbor that once.

"Watch your step out there, Alfreda," she said by way of parting. "There's more between heaven and earth than any man knows, I'll tell you." I must have looked as confused as I felt, because she waved me off, her worn face looking a little disgusted. "Get me some onions and garlic from the garden on your way back!"

And so I was free. There was nothing like walking through the long yellow grass, following the golden shadow that was my father. People say Dolph and I are like him, both in looks and manner, and that's a compliment. He's the smartest man in our village. Even smarter than Father John, I think, although Momma's always running to the priest. I don't think Papa's family has ever had any use for gods. But if gods help Momma more than the old ways, that's all right with Papa. Whatever works, that's what he always says.

"Do you think something ate the wolf, Papa?" I called as I tried to keep up.

"Hope not, child. A wolf pelt is worth a lot. We should be in time; sun's just rising." His deep voice carried easily through the underbrush, although I'd lost sight of him.

"How much farther?" I asked, catching my skirt on an ash shoot.

"Not f— Alfreda, stay where you are."

I stopped tugging on my skirt. His tone would have warned me that something was wrong, even if he hadn't used my full name. A bear? I waited, silent, for him to call, all the while carefully unhooking my clothes.

There was a *thunk* as his axe bit into wood, and the sound of something heavy falling. The grunt surprised me—did he try to break the wolf's fall? I crept toward the clearing.

"Papa—" I froze just as the word came out, as motionless as a stone. Something queasy began churning in the depths of my stomach.

He looked up from the twisted carcass before him, his face set and grey. "I told you to wait." No anger; his very lack of emotion frightened me.

"I . . . I heard you, like you needed help," I started, not sure if I should keep walking or hold my ground.

He made an abrupt gesture which drew me to his side. We both stared down at the torn and bloody lump of

flesh and black fur, slashed by dog and steel.

It was a man. At least I thought it was . . . it certainly wasn't a wolf. But it was hairier than any man I'd ever seen, even the palms and soles of the feet; and the teeth seemed wrong. I was sure I'd never seen him before. For a moment I felt faint—how could my father have made such a mistake? It was a full moon last night, you could see for miles—

Then I understood, and I started to tremble. I'd heard tales about wolves who really weren't wolves. . . .

I felt my father reach for me, his hands tighten on my arms as he pulled me away from the thing. "This goes no further, girl. Not to your mother, and certainly not to your brothers—not even Dolph."

"But—" I started.

"We don't know whom we can trust, child. Do you see? I know someone was bitten last night—maybe more than one—but we'll never be able to find out quickly if we announce it. He might even run, like this fellow did, and plague some other community." Papa broke off then, and turned from me, surveying the bloody scene. I kept my face turned toward the sun; the werewolf looked too much like a man, and that worried me. Finally Papa fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his pipe. Sitting down on a fallen log, he worked his flint several times before the tobacco caught fire.

We shared a long silence while the wind picked up and the sun crept through the undergrowth. I sat down beside him, grateful that we were upwind of the thing, and waited while he did his thinking. A man. That bloody mess was once a man. Grandfather had died quietly in his bed—no blood, no pain that I could see. A man shouldn't die in a field far from home with an ash spear through his heart. . . . Shivering, grateful summer was not yet gone, I finally grew brave enough to ask a question.

"Would Father John be able to help?"

Papa didn't answer at first, only chewed his pipe stem. After a while he said: "No, Allie. Exorcism's no good for werewolves. There are things both old and new that can help, though. . . ." He reached for my collar and tugged on the chain around my neck. I wore the metal cross of Momma's god, a tiny silver thing, the most valuable possession I owned. "Good. Keep it with you always, even when you sleep. Now, I need you to go get me something. Garlic. Enough to fill a hole, oh, this big." He demonstrated, making a circle with his arms. "Be quick, now, and remember—this goes no further."

Nodding, I practically flew to my mother's garden. I didn't know much about werewolves, but I did know you had to do special things when you buried them—or they didn't stay buried. Fortunately, garlic masters night things; both controls them and keeps them at bay. Momma devotes an entire plot to the stuff. I rooted busily in the rows, pulling up handfuls of bulbs and scooping them into my skirt. Folks outside might think that night creatures are only boogey stories, but back here in the hills we know better.

As I turned to start back to the clearing, I heard Momma calling me. "I'm still helping Papa!" I hollered, not stopping to hear her question. There was no way to get

back to him fast enough. I sure hoped he knew how to keep the werewolf from rising again at sunset. The thought of the walking dead froze my heart.

He'd been busy while I was gone. I made sure not to look too close. The head was separate from the body, and Papa carefully stuffed some garlic in its mouth. He'd cut a piece from the ash copse, too, and driven it through the chest. Then we started to gather firewood.

It takes a long time to burn a body. The sun rose high above us, and still the fire raged on. I tended it carefully, watching for stray cinders, while Papa cut several thick branches from the ash copse. By the time my reeking blaze had dwindled into coals, Papa had peeled and sharpened three good stakes. The sight made me shiver, so I concentrated on locating the wolf-man's ashes.

Werewolves burn clean—there wasn't a single chip of bone left. That surprised me, since the fire wasn't that hot, but Papa had left to get something, so I kept silent. Before long he returned with a wooden bucket and a shovel.

We took every speck of those wolf ashes to the crossroad by Farand's farm. I carried the rest of the garlic in my apron and dragged the stakes. Papa dug a real deep hole right in the center of the road. He set the bucket inside it and had me dump the garlic on top. It was a shame to see that fine bucket, garlic spilling down its sides into the dirt, because I knew Papa was going to bury it, too.

"Only ash slat bucket I ever made, child. No better use for it," he remarked, as if reading my mind. After smoothing some dirt over it, we laid stones on top, and finally packed the rest of the dirt down tight, so the road looked clean once more. Papa took the stakes from me, and we started for the house.

For once I appreciated those special "looks" Papa and Momma could exchange, because Momma never asked to see the wolf skin, and she didn't scold when I forgot the onions. Dolph and Josh asked, of course—Dolph told me he wanted to buy it from Papa for that girl he's sparking—but Papa told them it was too tore up to save, and they believed it. I don't think I ever heard Papa lie before or since. He made the older boys scrub with sundew again, and stood over them to see they did it right. Him and me, too, though I never touched the werewolf.

We were ready for supper when one of the neighbors stopped by. Papa went to talk to him, and was shaking his head when he came back to the table.

"Eldon?" Momma said, and her voice quivered, as if she didn't really want him to answer.

"Farand's little girl died," he said quietly, sitting down to his meal.

My mother gasped and put her hand to her breast. "The poor man! Both wife and child gone before the year's old."

That's when I almost messed up everything.

"It was a blessing." Like always, I was muttering; and like always, Momma heard me.

"Alfreda, whatever do you mean?" Momma was both sharp and astonished. I saw the intense look Papa was giving me and tore through my head for something to say.

"Isn't that what you always say, Momma? That God loves us; and that when bad things happen, there's a reason for it, even if we don't know it?" I feared it was

awkward, but she seemed to accept my twisted reasoning. She was silent several moments before she told me not to say it in front of little Ben and Joe. Then the only sound was Dolph's drinking, as he poured himself still another glass of water.

The month of Fruit wore into Vintage, and nothing happened.

But I could hear them.

Late at night the wind brought their voices to me, shrieking a nameless agony. What did it feel like to be slowly descending into madness, into terror? I had no proof that there was anything to fear, for no one else mentioned the strange calling of the wind. Deep inside I held my breath, while on the surface the harvest occupied every waking hour. Papa must've told some of the men about the body, the few he was sure of, because it seemed as if someone was stopping by every evening, "on rounds," as they would say. Momma knows things without being told, because she started getting edgy, and upset whenever little Ben and Joe strayed too far from the house. Her fears were foolish, and Papa told her so . . . although I don't think he told her why. After all, it's at night when werewolves prowl. But that didn't help Momma.

Then the nights of the full moon came, and the Anderssons' baby disappeared, and everybody knew.

Momma was hysterical. I didn't get to see the tracks until the next afternoon; she wouldn't let any of us out of her sight. But we knew more than anyone else, because they came to talk it over in our kitchen.

"At least three," my friend Idelia's father, accepting Papa's offer of spiced wine.

"I think it's four," my father responded, shaking his head slightly. "And we all know who one of them is."

No one spoke for several moments. I couldn't believe it—Andersson's baby dead and no one had anything to say? Papa saw the look on my face, but he didn't tell me to get back up the stairs. Josh and the babies were already up there, and Dolph hiding in his room behind the kitchen. Everyone who had gone on that hunt was afraid . . . afraid of what others were thinking.

"His father's helping him over," Papa continued. "He's a frail lad, not made for such evil. They found him out by the well this morning, trying to slake his thirst. But no blood on him. He didn't kill the baby; the others are stronger-willed than he."

"Do you think he can tell us anything, Eldon?" someone asked.

Papa chewed on his pipe for a time, then shrugged. "I've heard they remember little beyond the transformation. But he may know something. Now—a skinny boy he may be, but he'll grow. So, what are we to do?"

By the time there was a knock at the door, the werewolf's fate had been decided. I had been so surprised to see little Tate and his father coming up the walk that I almost missed what happened next.

They'd made a seat for him by the fire, and had him sit down. He was practically in tears, poor Tate, and not making a lot of sense. The father looked so pale, so old, I didn't know which one I felt for most.

"We aren't going to kill you, lad," my father said softly, and then Tate started crying. "The old Gustusson place has a barn; still solid, the doors sound. It will be your home three nights a moon. Down by the big water, off Cantev Way, they've had a werewolf some fifteen years. Has a wife and family. But they lock him up tight when need be, and so we shall with you. But we need your help, Tate. What can you tell us about last night?"

I almost fell off my stair, I leaned forward so far. But Papa's fears were right; Tate remembered almost nothing. "Tired," he kept saying. "I was so tired, but I couldn't stop running, none of us could. And the thirst, the terrible thirst . . ." He looked thirsty as he said it, and my father gave him a wooden cup full of water. Tate downed it without looking at it—he still stared at the men, as if afraid they would change their minds.

They didn't. Several of them escorted him to the barn where he would spend the night, and I knew a few would guard. The folks of Sun-Return would heed the lesson of Cantev Way. Tate was craving living flesh; fighting a thirst that would not die, a thirst blood could not satisfy.

I didn't creep downstairs until after Papa showed the last of them out. "Now what?" I asked quietly. After all, next to Papa, I knew more about taking care of problem werewolves than anyone else in town.

"Nothing," said Momma briskly as she brought in a basket of vegetables. Her eyes settled on the lone cup among the emptied jugs of wine. Without comment she picked it up and threw it into the fireplace. "You leave werewolves to your father. I want you to keep a tight eye on Joe and Ben, and keep everyone inside all you can. We must seal the house against them, and the barn, too—they'll go after stock when decent folks are abed."

Papa had a thoughtful look in his eyes, but he only said: "I'll get some mustard seed for the windows and doorways. We'll need garlic boughs as well. Help your mother, Allie." He turned and started out to the barn.

Everyone in town was home by moonrise, I suppose, although first Dolph and the others his age went to the barn dance held by that couple wedded in the spring. No one wanted to be, well . . . uncouneted . . . during the time between. I went to bed in the tiny loft room with a feeling of apprehension. The old oak tree scratching the side of the house sounded like claws at the door, and the wind seemed to carry voices to me, speaking words in a language I did not know.

I could hear them.

Others might say it was a pack of wolves, but real wolves never sounded so desperate, not in the fat month of Vintage. The werewolves were out, I was sure, their number lessened but their strength untouched. After all, Tate was a child, barely Josh's age, and no loss to their pack. Though a rabid wolf Tate's size could be dangerous. . . . Still, a werewolf can beguile, it is said, and that is the true danger.

I could hear them calling.

I snuggled into the bedclothes and blew out my candle.

We found out early that Tate was dead. Died in a fall, the men at the barn said. In a frenzy to be free, he had

climbed into the loft to try and force the hay doors, and had fallen through an open hay-shoot. Papa told Momma that he had broken his neck, and Momma said it was a blessing, though she cried when she said it.

"How many sons will die?" she murmured as she passed, but she did not speak to me.

There wasn't anything to say. I was wondering the same thing.

Vintage moved into Fog, and Fog into Frost. Still a silver cross hung above our door. The men had no luck catching any of the remaining werewolves, but they discovered a chilling thing . . . the werewolves were not bound to the full moon.

"Sometimes it happens," Papa said when I asked. "Especially when the person doesn't choose to be a werewolf."

"You can choose to be one?"

"Those who deal with witchy people can," Papa answered, tapping his pipe. "Legends say that witches could use magic so a person would be a werewolf during a full moon, yet retain a grip on sanity. Only silver could kill one of those creatures. Turns out that when it's passed like a disease, there are many ways to rid yourself of werewolves—ash wood, and burning, and such."

I handed him his tobacco pouch so he'd keep talking. As he paused to relight his pipe, I whispered: "What binds them, if not their own will?"

"The phases of the moon, Allie. They start to change whenever the hunger comes upon them. The closer to the full moon, the more wolflike they become. We must be as kind as we can, daughter, even if we must kill, for this is not of their own will."

We sat in silence for a time, just Papa and me. Momma doesn't sit by the fire like she used to—I think she's afraid something will come down the chimney, although I hung garlic over the mantle. She's always giving me funny looks, lately. And Papa doesn't call me "child" anymore. I often wonder if they hear the wolves calling on the night breeze . . . if they hear what I hear.

I had a terrible nightmare that night. It was about Dolph's friends, the couple who got married last spring. They were in their bed; it was dark outside, yet I could see them in their bed. Only the quilt was black, as if soaked with blood, as if someone had died a-birthing. Her throat and chest were bloody, but only his arms, I could only see his arms—

It was Momma holding me when I woke up, trying to soothe me, but I couldn't be calmed. It was so real, as if I was in the room. I kept telling her that, kept trying to tell her about the dream, but she kept putting her hand over my mouth so I couldn't talk.

"Enough, Garda." Papa was there, by my door. "You can't keep her young forever, and you knew it might come to her."

"No! No, I won't allow it! Why do you think I had her baptized? Eldon—"

"But if it is truly a gift, woman, then your god should value it as much as we do." I heard the rustle of thatch, and knew Papa was sitting on the end of my little bed.

"It's all right, Allie. Tell me what you saw."

So I told them. Both of them—Momma stayed for the whole thing, her body hard as wood against mine. When I finished, I heard Papa stand once more.

"I should go get Farand."

Momma threw herself away from me, trying to stop him, I knew. "Not until morning! The moon lit the room for her Dreaming, and it's already low. Eldon, he's already killed her—"

"And he's still part wolf, Garda. Have pity. Better he die now, than come to his senses over her body."

Something in his words must have calmed her, because Momma finally let him leave, though she clung to him a time. Then she gently tucked me in, like when I was little, and told me to sleep myself out, she'd see to the chickens. It seemed a long time before I finally heard her walk back down the narrow hall to the ladder. Sleep was forever coming, because I had lots to think about. Strange dreams, strange words, strange looks . . . for the first time, I realized that Momma was afraid for me. But I didn't understand why.

I could still hear them calling.

By the time I woke the next morning, there were only two werewolves left. Something else had also changed: Papa wasn't going hunting anymore. None of the other men seemed upset with him or anything—he just was no longer expected to hunt werewolves. I heard one of them say, "You're needed to guard what's under your roof," but it didn't make any sense.

Nerves grew tighter as the full moon loomed near. Papa and the older boys set up the trap line, and I learned to prepare the skins and stretch them properly. It was hard, messy work, but Momma made it look easy, so I knew I could learn it, too, if I kept trying.

We stuck close to home when the morning finally came upon us. Up before sunrise, I found the family already busy with chores. Papa was out checking traps while Josh worked by the fireplace, tightening the snowshoes. It was in the air, the snow. It would make tracking the werewolves easier. . . .

"Take your brother some fever tea, Allie," Momma called from the front room where she was bathing the young'uns. "He's out in the cold store."

Still yawning, I filled a stone crock with whatever Momma had brewed and took it out to the shed. Dolph was there, all right, knee-deep in beaver and mink, covered with blood from the skinning. He looked white and pasty in the dim light, and suddenly I was worried. Idelia had the fever, and I couldn't bear it if Dolph had it, too.

"Here." I thrust the pot at him. "Momma says have some tea." Sometimes I'm so stupid; Momma must have noticed how he looked last night.

He moved the lid aside and took a few gulps, and then turned away as his stomach turned over.

"Dolph?" I knew he heard the fear in my voice.

"I'm all right!" It was almost belligerent. His eyes already had the touch of fever in them. Bad, real bad—a full moon tonight; no healer would come here during the full moon, maybe not even during the day.

"You should rest, you've probably got what Idelia has,"

I started, noticing how sloppy he was taking pelts. More like me or Josh than his usual skill. I'd have to tell Papa.

"Git, Allie. I can finish my work."

I knew that tone. I got. I took the side trek, around the house, since the path was windward, and as I shuffled through the gloom, I saw a curious thing. Green shoots peeping up from the loose dirt by the house, barely showing, already withered. I bent to examine the sprouts.

Garlic. Frowning, I examined the entire side, down by the kitchen and then back up to the other end. Momma would've told me if she planted garlic over here, we would've made more of a shelter than this—I looked up, and realized what it must be. The garlic above Dolph's window had fallen. Some time ago, to judge by the length of the shoots. Carefully uprooting the sprouts, I hid them under my shawl and continued around to the front door. No sense telling Momma; she'd only get upset. Plenty of time to hang more garlic before evening.

They got the third werewolf in the act of transformation. I hadn't known him well—he was a widower, his children grown, and he lived the far side of the settlement. But he must have sensed what he was, or he wouldn't have lingered at the tavern until sundown. The men there tried to get him into the storeroom, to lock him up, but he was too crazy, and they had to kill him so he wouldn't bite no—anyone. They came straight to tell Papa, and to ask him if I'd figured out anything else.

Papa cut them off at that, and drew them away, motioning for Momma to take me into the kitchen. We left them in the front room and moved around to the other side of the firewall. Josh had hidden himself upstairs, and the little ones were asleep.

"Momma, what did they mean by—"

"Don't worry yourself, Alfreda," she said in her "mother" voice. "It's nothing to fear."

"Haden't you better tell me about it? Momma . . . am I a werewolf or something?" I asked solemnly.

"She actually started laughing, but I could hear hysteria behind it. "Dear God, no, daughter. Quite the opposite."

And then she told me. Seems the women in our family often have what they call "The Gift." Of knowing things no one has told them, and dreaming true dreams. Momma's grandmother was the wise woman of the village, once, and everyone depended on her advice. "They're hoping you're growing up the same way, what with your dream about the other night."

"But you're not." I wasn't sure she'd understand what I meant, but she did. Her face grew still.

"I have some of it, daughter. It is a great burden. I fear the burden, which is why, I think, it comes rarely to me. I do not envy you . . . I tried to protect you." This was very low. "I thought that if you didn't learn about The Gift, it would never trouble you. I thought you'd be happier . . . not knowing." She sat studying the fire, almost unaware of me, as the voices of the men in front rose and fell like a chorus of birds.

"Don't worry, Momma. I'll protect you." I said it with a smile, to try to coax one from her, but I meant it—I'm stronger than my mother, you see, in so many ways.

She sighed and reached for the kettle. "Drink some angelica tea, child. It's good for almost any ailment. I left some more next to Dolph's bed, before he threw me out." Shaking her head, she rose. "Just like his father; he has no use for nursing when he's sick. We'll just leave him be, and call the healer come morning if he's no better."

I realized I hadn't told Momma about Dolph throwing up the tea, but then Papa came in to speak to her, so I bent my head to my mug.

Somehow, somehow, between a long draught of tea and a glance at the fire, something changed. The taste of crushed seeds lingered on my tongue, as if trying to tell me something. Tell me . . .

Angelica. The one herb that is proof against all forms of evil. Stray shards of thought came together in my mind, to form a coherent whole. Angelica. Garlic. Thirst. . . . My hands began to shake.

"Alfreda?" It was Papa. He hardly ever called me that; I turned slowly toward the sound of his voice, trying to see through a blur of tears. Bending one knee, he lowered himself to my level.

I waited for him to speak, but he did not. Finally my eyes cleared, and I met his steady gaze. It gave me the crawlies, that gaze, because it wasn't quite like it had ever been before. It was still my father looking out at me, but it was no longer a parent talking to a child. It was a man talking with his grown daughter. Only a moment, and all things change forever. . . .

"Alfreda, I must go with the others. To stop the last werewolf. The madness has set in, we think—he's been attacking wild animals, and that might spread the disease." His eyes held mine, as if begging something from me. "I need you to take care of your Momma and the little boys. Will you do that for me?"

He knew. And he knew I knew. He was so strong, I was ashamed at my weakness.

"Of course, Papa. I will take care of everything. Be careful." I reached to touch his arm, memorizing his face, afraid that something even worse might yet happen that night. "Don't let him suffer . . . anymore."

His hand was warm against my cheek as he rose. "I'll be back soon, Garda. Wait up for me, please." He reached to touch her lips lightly before turning and starting toward the front. Momma followed, to bar the door and drape the boughs of garlic securely.

I stood slowly, feeling the weight of my father's pain. Finishing my tea, I set the cup aside and reached for the garlic braid I had made earlier. "Momma," I called, "I'm going to check the rest of the garlic and mustard seed."

"Thank you, Alfreda. I'll take care of the upstairs." She went past me and up the ladder without comment, so swiftly I wondered momentarily if she knew. But no—Momma fears the burden, so I must know for both of us, now. Checking the tightness of my weaving, I gave the braid a final tug and then reached for my father's chair. Not too heavy, but still it was an effort to carry, not drag, it to the door between the kitchen and the back bedroom.

Standing on the chair, I listened, scarcely breathing. But no . . . he had already left through the window.

I hung the boughs of garlic over the bedroom door. ♦



# Meteorites and Planet Pieces

Stephen L. Gillett

The notion that asteroids are the relics of an exploded planet between Mars and Jupiter is a hoary SF cliché, and not just in SF, either: the late Loren Eiseley once wrote a literate and chilling essay on the Lost Planet. But this idea has been obsolete for years—although you wouldn't know it even from some recent science fiction.

Why is it obsolete? Because most meteorites are (almost certainly) pieces of broken-up asteroids, and on both geochemical and textural evidence the meteorites date from just after the birth of the Solar System. So the asteroids must as well.

What do meteorites look like? Well, that depends on the meteorite. And there are a lot of different types. Even so, there are some broad, useful categories.

**Chondrites**, for one. They're the commonest of the two classes of "stony" meteorites, and they have overall compositions very similar to the Sun (minus the easily vaporized elements like hydrogen and helium). Chondrites contain chondrules, which look like little frozen droplets of rock. And that's just what they are. Meteoritists once thought they were droplets of molten rock that had actually condensed from the solar nebula, the giant cloud from which the Solar System formed. Even though this probably isn't true, they're still pieces of the original nebula. They got melted by an obscure mechanism, back before the planets themselves accreted. (Lightning discharges in

the nebula, or magnetic flares from twisted-up magnetic fields, are two possibilities. Either way, the chondrules reflect turbulent, chaotic conditions in the seething nebular cloud.)

The chondrules are stuck into a mishmash of material, the "matrix," that contains everything from fragments of silicate minerals (some containing combined water, others not), to sulfide minerals (combinations of metals—usually iron and nickel—and sulfur), to some iron-nickel metal, to even, in some chondrites, water-soluble minerals such as epsomite (Epsom salts). The most primitive chondrites are the carbonaceous chondrites, which contain tarlike material in the matrix as well. Many also contain "calcium-aluminum-rich inclusions" (affectionately "CAIs"), blobs of high-temperature silicate and oxide minerals, some of which are as big as pigeon eggs. These, in fact, may be leftover drops condensed out of the solar nebula.

So chondrites generally, and carbonaceous chondrites especially, have high-temperature stuff jumbled together with low-temperature stuff, all stirred together like the aggregate in a cement mixer. Such a conglomerate could never have been "cooked" at much higher temperatures, as would happen if it were part of a planet: it would react together like gangbusters if it was ever stewed in a planet! Instead, the chondrites were never part of anything much bigger than a mountain. They're leftover planet stuff, like the pieces of debris

still strewn around a newly finished construction project.

Age dates from radioactivity confirm this impression. All the chondrites are extremely old, around 4.5 billion years. We measure their ages from the decay of long-lived natural radioactive elements, such as uranium, thorium, and the radioactive isotope of potassium (K-40). To get the age, we count up the number of daughter atoms that have formed over geologic time as their parent atoms decayed (see my article "Counting the Ages," July 1991).

Such an atomic "signature" is very sensitive to reheating, because if you melt the object, or even just warm it up enough, the daughter atoms go away. They move to some more chemically congenial environment. And that means the age information is lost. In fact, this is how the "radiometric clock" gets set in the first place: when you first crystallize a mineral containing uranium or potassium, it starts out pure. But as the mineral ages, the radioactive daughter products build up—and as long as the mineral isn't heated too much, they stick around where they can be counted.

In fact, a few carbonaceous chondrites have what look to be pieces of pre-Solar System material, original interstellar grains that escaped the original melting-down that went on in the solar nebula. How can we tell this? From their distinctive isotopic compositions. ("Isotopes" are varieties of a single chemical element

that differ only in the number of neutrons in the nucleus.)

For example, in certain of those CAIs, the oxygen in the minerals is "anomalous"—that it, its isotope ratios are not typical. Oxygen has three stable isotopes: O-16, O-17, and O-18. Now, chemical processes can separate isotopes, and in fact that separation is used all the time to track geochemical processes. For example, when water evaporates, the vapor contains more of the light oxygen isotope (O-16), and the liquid left behind is enriched in the heavy isotope (O-18).

But: chemical separation of isotopes is very systematic; it depends only on the difference in mass. The effect for O-17, for example, with respect to O-16 is always half that of O-18, reflecting the fact that O-17 has one extra neutron but O-18 has two.

The isotopes in these mineral inclusions don't follow this pattern. Instead, it looks as though they were diluted by some additional pure oxygen-16, perhaps added to the nebular cloud by a nearby supernova. (Recently, some weird chemical reactions that don't discriminate among isotopes by mass have been found. Scientists, therefore, are seeing if this isotope "signature" can be explained in some other way—but it still looks as though simply shoveling in some pure O-16 is the simplest explanation.)

Other inclusions have an excess of the heavy isotopes of calcium, titanium and chromium. For example, one contains nearly 1% of the heaviest stable isotope of calcium, Ca-48. Ordinary calcium is 96.9% calcium-40, with Ca-48 making up only 0.2%. (The other 2.9% of ordinary Ca is spread among calcium's four other stable isotopes.)

The noble gases—the set of gases that don't enter chemical combination, which include helium, neon, argon, krypton, and xenon—in meteorites also show pronounced variations in their compositions of isotopes. (Radon is also a noble gas, but all its isotopes are radioactive with very short half-lives.) Of course, since the noble gases are chemically inert, they make up only tiny por-

tions of meteoritic rock. They're just trapped, in one way or another, in the mineral crystals themselves. The noble gases are convenient to work with, though, because (1) they *are* gases, and (2) they don't react with the rock. This means they can all be baked out or etched out with chemicals; you don't have to worry about the released gas reacting with your reagents or your labware. One standard procedure, for example, is to first separate out various minerals from the meteorite, and then see what noble gases are trapped in them. Finally, even tiny amounts (micrograms or less) of noble gases are (relatively) easy to work with using modern techniques.

In fact, noble gases gave the first evidence that actual pre-Solar System grains had survived in some meteorites. A minuscule fraction of neon consisting of pure neon-22 (which is only 10% of normal Solar-System neon) proved to be trapped in tiny silicon carbide (SiC) grains. The neon came from the decay of short-lived sodium-22, with a half-life of only  $2\frac{1}{2}$  years. The silicon carbide seems to have formed in the atmosphere of a star, perhaps a nova. There, newly formed sodium-22 got stuck in the grain and later decayed to neon. (Silicon carbide is manufactured as an abrasive under the trade name Carborundum, and it's generally used to polish rocks for study! So finding such tiny crystals of natural silicon carbide was very difficult; they weren't even discovered until the last few years. You have to polish your meteorite with something else to be able to distinguish them from your polishing grit.)

Similarly, distinctive mixtures of xenon isotopes have been found. One type is stuck into tiny diamond crystals that crystallized from hot gas, perhaps from an expanding supernova cloud. Another type, like the neon-22, is implanted instead in silicon carbide, and may have come from a red giant's atmosphere.

Recently, a team of scientists at Caltech in Pasadena, California, have found tiny SiC crystals in which both the carbon and the silicon have distinctive isotopic signatures: for one thing, the crystals contain much more

C-13 than normal Solar System carbon. (Carbon has two stable isotopes, C-12 and C-13, and silicon has three: Si-28, Si-29, and Si-30.) The team thinks these silicon carbide grains crystallized in the atmosphere of a red giant and were originally sprayed out into interstellar space by the giant star's stellar winds, just as with the xenon above.

As I pointed out in "The Importance of Being Semi-Semi-Stable" (March 1991), many meteorites also contain the spoor of early-formed radioactive nuclei, nuclei with half-lives of mere millions of years. (The important nucleus aluminum-26, with a half-life of a little less than a million years, is one example.) Although such nuclei are now completely vanished, they hadn't yet decayed away completely when the meteorites were forming from the nebula.

Obviously, then, the solar nebula was not completely stirred together! The elements that would make up our Solar System were formed in many different places and at different times—and we can see now traces of those different element forging-places in the meteorite record.

To be sure, though, other types of meteorite are not just raw planet-stuff. They're a lot more processed than the chondrites. The rest of the "stony" meteorites, for example, are *achondrites*, which (you guessed it!) don't have chondrules. We also have everyone's favorite meteorites, the irons, which are made of an iron-nickel alloy with other metals (such as cobalt and platinum-group elements) stirred in. A few hybrid meteorites, the stony irons, contain big chunks of silicate minerals stuck like puddingstones into a matrix of iron-nickel alloy.

But even these more processed meteorites are still not pieces of the Lost Planet. They're pieces of planetesimals instead. "Planetesimals" are the next step to forming planets. They're what most of the chondrite-like material first accumulated into, bodies ranging from maybe ten up to a few hundred kilometers across—about like a large main-belt asteroid. (In fact, the present large main-belt asteroids, like Ceres, are proba-

bly just lucky leftover planetesimals that have escaped being broken up over the Solar System's 4.5 billion year history.)

Such planetesimals were large enough that they actually separated out chemically due to their internal heating, very soon after they were formed. They melted and the molten material settled out, separating like salad dressing left in the refrigerator. The iron-nickel sank into the center, where it cooled slowly and developed those spectacular crystal structures you see in textbooks. The lighter silicates floated, like slag on molten steel. The source of heat for melting was probably extinct aluminum-26 (which I mentioned above), because its decay puts out lots of energy. Induction heating from large magnetic fields in the nebula may also have helped, though. All this happened quickly, too—the radioactive age dates on such “processed” meteorites show they're almost as old as the chondrites themselves.

Thus, iron meteorites are actually broken-up pieces of planetesimal (i.e., asteroid) core; they're just like the iron core of the Earth, but on a much smaller scale. Similarly, the achondrites are just the rocks from the planetesimal's crust, chunks of lavas that originally spilled out over the surface. And the stony-irons came from within the planetesimal, near the boundary of its core.

How did they get busted up? By collisions, by slamming off each other like marbles over the Solar System's history. Most surviving asteroids are such broken-up chunks, as the space probe Galileo's recent photos of Gaspra showed. And meteorites are the even smaller broken-off pieces.

Sometimes we can even tell when a meteorite was broken. After a collision, the broken surfaces are suddenly exposed to cosmic rays, which make short-lived radioactive nuclei when they collide with atoms in the surface. (Well, “short-lived” on a geologic timescale, with half-lives of a few million years or so.) By counting up how many such atoms and their decay products there are in the surface, you can calculate how long ago the surface was exposed. Obviously, the longer the surface was ex-

posed, the more such nuclei it builds up.

Overall, then, the asteroids are busted-up, leftover pieces of planet-stuff that never managed to get accreted into a full-sized planet, and meteorites are just the smallest bits of debris, trickling our way. Jupiter was probably the culprit that kept them from accreting; its gravity kept their orbits stirred up so that they ran into each other *hard* and couldn't accumulate. As the leftover planetesimals—asteroids—got used up over time, the collisions have tapered off—but they're not necessarily finished by any means. And thus we're left with the present Belt—never actually a planet, but just a dwindling stock of leftovers.

In the last decade or so, though, a few meteorites have turned out to be pieces of planet after all. But not of an unknown Lost Planet—of perfectly well-known worlds instead.

Several meteorites found in Antarctica a few years ago turned out to be from the Moon. The first was informally dubbed “Apollo 18” (the last Apollo mission, of course, was Apollo 17 in 1972). Recently a lunar meteorite was found in Australia.

All these are breccias from the lunar highlands—the ancient, heavily cratered, light-colored areas of the Moon. (A “breccia”—*brech-uh*—is any rock made of broken fragments of other rock.) They're distinctive lunar rock types that have been heavily broken up by meteorite impact.

How, though, can we tell something's from the Moon? Just looking at it seems a weak way to check. Well, as one group of scientists put it, it's easy to show that a meteorite is *not* from someplace. Planets, because they've had billions of years to stew together, develop distinctive chemical “fingerprints”—typical patterns of element abundances from all that ongoing processing. They're giant natural fractionating plants. For example, Earth's crust is rich in potassium, much richer than the Moon's crust or any meteorite. Over geologic time, potassium has been chemically “sweated” out of our planet's interior and concentrated into its crust by ongoing geochemical processing, mostly from plate tectonics.

To be sure, a planet like the Earth also contains lots of different kinds of rocks. So to find these chemical “fingerprints,” we look at impurities in the rocks. Natural geochemical processes are pretty sloppy. They never make anything perfectly pure! As geochemists say, “There's a little of something in anything, and a little of anything in something.”

So, to show a meteorite doesn't come from somewhere, we just have to show that a chemical pattern from it—usually a set of ratios of element concentrations—isn't the same as that from the proposed “parent body.” For example, to show a rock was from Earth, you might look at the potassium/sodium ratio. Both elements have similar chemical properties, so they tend to get incorporated in the same way; since Earth's crust is enriched in potassium, though, you'd expect the ratio to be relatively high in Earth rocks (and it is).

Of course, it's harder to show that a meteorite is from a certain parent body, because you have to show that *all* the chemical “fingerprints” match up. But scientists have done this for the Moon meteorites. (By the way, it was once thought that the strange, meteoritelike rocks called “tektites” might be from the Moon. Once we got some data on real Moon rocks, though, it became clear that tektites' element signatures are very different. In fact, it looks as though tektites are derived from the Earth. Most scientists now think they're frozen “splash” thrown out of impact craters on the Earth.)

Another class of achondrite meteorites, the SNCs (“snicks”), is even more interesting. They may have come from Mars. They're named for their three prototype meteorites, Shergotty-Nakhla-Chassigny (from the places they fell).

This isn't as well established, of course; we don't have any actual samples of Mars to compare them to. So it's kind of a best-probable-match. But the match looks pretty good, for the following reasons.

First, the SNCs differ from regular achondrites in their ages. They're much younger, around a billion years or so. Right off the bat that makes them look like a piece of a

planet. Second, after we got the results back from the Viking lander on Mars, we knew what the noble-gas composition of Mars's atmosphere is—and the noble gases trapped in these achondrites look a lot like those in Mars's atmosphere. Finally, the chemical patterns of the rocks suggest they came from a big planet. Just as with Earth rocks, they reflect a lot of chemical processing over a lot of geologic time.

But, how do you get such meteorites off their parent worlds? *Gigantic* meteorite impacts blew the rocks off into space. Although that's not quite as cataclysmic as an exploding planet, it should be a spectacular enough catastrophe for anybody! You'd want to watch it from space, at any rate, not from the planet itself. (Surprisingly, the Mars-rocks weren't too affected by the impact. They were far enough from "Ground Zero" that they got shocked rather than shocked.)

No other planetary pieces have been recognized, though, but people are still looking. And since it seems we're not going to make it back to the Moon—much less go on to the planets—for a while, it's nice to get some samples in to tide us over!

And maybe if we're *really* lucky, we'll find a *big* piece of interstellar meteorite one of these days. . . .

#### Reference:

*Meteorites and the Early Solar System*, eds. J. F. Kerridge and M. S. Matthews, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1988.

This is another technical reference, one of the U of A's marvelous "Space Science Series," for those interested in pursuing this further. The cover of the book has a nice painting of asteroids colliding! ♦

# About the Authors

The last time a piece of writing by **Ursula K. Le Guin** appeared in this magazine, it turned out to be a tough act to follow—tough for us, that is, but not particularly tough for her.

It has been more than 21 years since her novel *The Lathe of Heaven* was serialized in AMAZING® Stories. At the time she had already won one Hugo and one Nebula Award, both for *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In 1971, *The Lathe of Heaven* made the final ballot for both awards, but she had to wait until the following year to claim her second major award. Now, 30 years since her career began with the publication of "April in Paris" in *Fantastic* and 23 years since earning her first major award, she has won five Hugos and four Nebulas—most recently the 1990 Best Novel Nebula for *Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea*—and has a host of other accomplishments that would make her biography read like a *Who's Who* of literary awards.

But despite all the recognition (or perhaps because of it), Ms. Le Guin doesn't do a lot of autobiographical writing—preferring to let her work speak for itself. "The Rock That Changed Things," which marks her return to these pages on the occasion of her 30th anniversary as a professional writer, certainly *does* speak for itself—and we're privileged to present it as the central element in this issue's special package, along with a look back at "April in Paris" and a rare bit of first-person writing in which she discusses these "Different Stories With a Lot in Common."

Our star-studded lineup for September continues with the second story from **Barry B. Longyear** in four months (following "Blades of the Diram Ring" in the May issue). Aside from being no-doubt-about-it science fiction, you might think that "The Green" defies categorization—but not so, according to Barry, who defines it as "an SF, horror, love, coming of age, planet-tamer, environmental piece (for those who rely upon labels)." We couldn't have put it better. . . .

Also returning for a quick encore is **Harry Turtledove**, who told the story of "The Last Reunion" in our June issue. This time he chronicles the exploits of the "Deconstruction Gang," a piece that he says represents his first venture into magic realism. Is Harry trying to say that this story couldn't *really* happen?

**Charles Sheffield** hasn't appeared in this magazine since the early years of his career. We're pleased to be able to rectify that state of affairs with "The Price of Civilization," a piece of near-future SF that is as entertaining as it is thought-provoking.

Making the fastest return appearance of all this month is **Phil Jennings**, who led off the July issue with "The Vortex" and maintains his brisk pace of publication with "The Tubes of Baal-Ashereth." It's bizarre, but at the same time it sort of fits into the same niche as many of the other stories in this issue.

And then, for something completely different, there's "Night Calls" by **Katharine Eliska Kimbriel**, which is in a niche all by itself as far as the contents of this issue are concerned. It also happens to be Katharine's first appearance in AMAZING Stories in a career that began with the publication of her first novel in 1986.

To get a good idea how things are going for **Mercedes Lackey**, look no farther than pages 72 and 73 of this magazine—where her name appears seven (!) times in association with novels that are being released or reissued in October. Counting two other books that came out this summer—one of them *The Ship Who Searched*, which is concluded in this issue—chances are her name will be on more different titles in your local bookstore than just about anyone else's. If you've been keeping up with the serial in the last four issues of this magazine, you already know one reason why Misty's work is popular—and there's plenty of other evidence available. ♦

# Thus Our Words Unspoken

Barry N. Malzberg

It was always a taboo-laden category, a genre with its little mines and traps laid from end to end, the field of science fiction a difficult and potentially disastrous campaign for point man and platoon. Under the circumstances, the achievements of the editors and writers were remarkable; there were the magazine codes with which to contend from the beginning, and then Fred Wertham's assault upon the comics (Wertham the professor-psychologist who testified frequently to Congress) which brought about the Comics Code. This had implications for all kinds of mass-market fiction perceived as appealing to a significantly juvenile audience. Beyond this were the editorial whims, conscious perversities and demands; John W. Campbell would not permit aliens to be smarter than humans or allow any questioning of capitalism or virginity into *Astounding*; Horace L. Gold took out all sexual references which he could find (sometimes, as in Asimov's 1951 "Hostess," the writers either out-smarted or dared him) and was fond of saying in rejection notices that "I run a family magazine here," even though the pictures of Vicki, the French model on the back cover of the early 1951 issues of *Galaxy*, had caused vast expressions of horror from mothers of science-fiction-reading boys everywhere.

Then there is the background of Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon" as recalled by Robert P. Mills. In 1958 Mills and Keyes occasionally

took the same train from Grand Central to the northern suburbs, and when Mills was named editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* he asked Keyes if he would write a story. "Well, I *have* this story," Keyes said. "It's about this imbecile who becomes a volunteer for research into raising human intelligence and becomes a genius but then the experiment fails and he becomes an imbecile again. It's a parable of knowledge, you see."

Mills said, "That sounds interesting; let me take a look at it." So Keyes took the story out of a bottom desk drawer and gave it to Mills, and Mills said on the next shared train home, "I think you've really got something there, but I have a few suggestions."

Keyes broke into tears and seized Mills by the lapels. "Please," he said, "oh please, please *don't* tell me that I have to drop the part where Charlie becomes an imbecile again. Don't tell me that I have to have a happy ending and he stays a genius."

"Well, no," Mills said. "I wasn't thinking of that at all. I did think that maybe—"

"Because," Keyes said emotionally, still clutching Mills, "that's what Horace wanted. Horace said he would buy it for *Galaxy* only if Charlie didn't become stupid again, that he couldn't publish such a depressing story and I can't, I simply *can't* make myself do that—"

"Oh, no," Mills said hurriedly and went on to say that his suggestions had to do with a subplot in which

maybe Charlie had a girl teacher and he and the teacher kind of fell in love after Charlie got smart. Keyes said that he certainly could understand that something like this would improve the story and in due course it was revised and published and the rest you know about.

But this is, to get back to the central and originating point here, a genre so laden with constraints, demands and prejudices of a historical nature that it is very difficult to believe that, in this present era or beyond, science fiction is not still laden and will not continue to be laden with traps, that insistent as editors are upon their liberation from those constraints, as careless as the writers might say they are of the need to slant or control their work, these problems and limitations remain to control limits and to incite within writers and editors alike that self-censor, which, it has been pointed out, is the most effective censor of all since it can cut off exposure not upon completion but upon inception; those flowers not blushing unseen in the desert air and winds and gravity of editorial response but simply not produced at all.

At a panel discussion at the undistinguished convention sponsored in 1989 by Columbia University's science fiction club, the issue was raised and Ellen Datlow of *Omni* said, "It's not like that any more; there are no taboos left."

Which, I said, was patently ridiculous. "Of course there are taboos," I

said. "In fact, I can come up with ten story ideas in the next fifteen minutes that I know neither you nor any science fiction editor past or present will possibly consider on the basis of their content alone."

"Well," she said after a very long pause (not as long as Jack Benny's pause in that famous radio encounter with the thief in the back alley who said, "Your money or your life?"), "there are *some* taboos left."

Which there surely are. Here in 1992, in the free market, 66 years after the origin of genre science fiction, 47 years after the effective use of the atom bomb on people, one year short of the 40th anniversary of *Playboy*, and 19 years after the conclusion of our role in the festivities in Vietnam, are some story premises, conceptions or progressions which could not possibly be sold, regardless of the skill, the fame, the propinquity or the disingenuousness of the writer:

1) XENOPHOBIA. Fear and hatred of the alien being or terrain is an important survival trait; it has persisted in humanity throughout all of the millennia in the forms of prejudice, bigotry, nativism, jingoism, hatred of foreigners or persecution of the immigrant because ultimately it is a part of a species survival mechanism.

If the aliens come or if we meet them somewhere on the other side of the Centaurs, they are likely to be malevolent, they will be at least as interested in oppressing us as in getting along; certainly in all the myriad possibilities of human-alien encounter there will be alien details whose plans are sheerly destructive. Under those circumstances, obviously, xenophobia will be a mechanism of survival and protection, and to breed xenophobia out of humanity by genetic manipulation or (more likely) through acculturation may be a form of species suicide. One can envision a time not too far from now or perhaps very far from now in

which xenophobia and all of its manifestations will have become so repellent and shameful as to have virtually disappeared; then with alien contact either inaugurated or imminent, it may occur—perhaps before a disaster, perhaps only after—that xenophobia has gotten a bad press for all of the generations and that any hope for species survival and proper engagement outside our own planet may depend upon inculcating within the present and future generations of travelers (or those on Earth if the alien contact occurs here) all of those traits which the "progressive" elements have shown us are hateful, inhumane, anti-life or utterly destructive. Schools of bigotry? Practice lynchings of simulated aliens? Search for aliens or alien traits which may be particularly dangerous, a *modus operandi* for identifying difference and the propitiation of malice?

In a series of scenarios which could develop—probably best at novel length but certainly workable within the story—the achievement of xenophobic hatred through the devices of programmed bigotry (and the identification through psychological depth testing and social observation) might assume genuine urgency, might be linked with the ability of humanity to survive against aliens whose xenophobia has *not* been bred or acculturated in them, and the central figure in such a narrative would be one who is either educated to understand xenophobia as a necessary trait or who already knows this and must persuade the others.

There is some of this, masked, in the 1940s *Astounding* school of science fiction, manifest in writers such as Hubbard and Heinlein. These stories, however, elide the issue; they do not address xenophobic loathing of aliens as linked directly to (and predicted by) nativism, bigotry or prejudice on the part of the sturdy space captains and interstellar scouts who must fight bureaucrats as well as marauding aliens. A straightforward, acknowledged acceptance of these qualities as properly selecting the most sympathetic and alert character does not exist in that or any other kind of science fiction.

2) BIOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE. Or, as Freud said, "Biology is destiny." Women are constructed to bear and nurture infants; men and women are biologically designed to have sexual relations as a condition of procreation; reduced sexual attractiveness is a discouragement to perpetuation of the unattractive characteristics. Disease is a form of natural selection; lack of intelligence, left to its own devices, will select out stupidity as a characteristic of the race. To the degree that individuals or cultures wander from that biological imperative, deny the simple truth of Freud's dictum, they are risking the fury of natural selection and cultural breakdown.

To countenance forms of sexuality other than those which are procreation-driven, to deny the fundamental childbearing and nurturing responsibilities of women, to artificially maintain or subsidize an underclass incapable of surviving on its own—to incorporate this flaunting of the natural law, the biological imperative in the mores of a culture, is to seal, in the long run if not the short, the destruction of that culture and perhaps humanity itself.

What Freud called "civilization and its discontents" can be reviewed, in terms of all post-industrial politics, sociology and social systems as an inexorable *denial* of this biological imperative, granting sanction to roles and behavior which were never intended by the slow evolution of the species up to that point of post-industrialization.

In sum, then, all politics and social theory in the past few centuries has represented—in the name of "liberalism" or "expanding roles" or "revolution of possibilities"—as granting artificial sanction to that which of itself could never have survived, the propitiation of a population and behavioral roles which in the Hobbsian natural state or the Freudian archetype could never have evolved. Whether this is true or not, whether "evolution" is indeed an evolving of possibility and patterns, or whether it is a process which has only shifted circumstances further from true adaptation, certainly composes an interesting, even central

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\* After the slowest-building, longest laugh in radio history, to that point, Benny got a longer one by saying, finally, "I'm thinking it over!"



Stories such as "The Women Men Don't See" or "Houston Houston Do You Read?" or "When It Changed" can explore and question with some savagery the viability of certain common cultural assumptions, but those writers and those who have come after have not been able to explore—beyond the anger which the persistence of biology as destiny has caused—why none of the experiments with alternate systems or an ideology not tied intrinsically to biology have ever, or at least to this historical point, been successful.

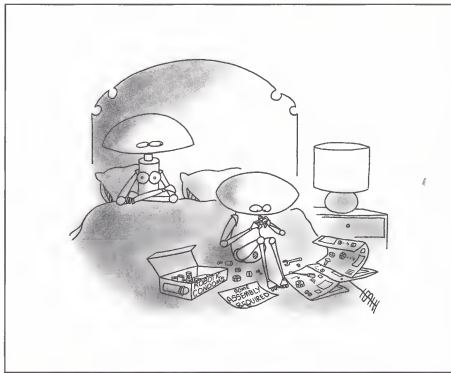
If some of the traits of the rapist might, in the Hobbsian natural state, be construed as having value—will, self-determination, the primacy of demand, that certain fixity of purpose which conventional courtship behavior must often deny—then these are values which can perhaps only be perpetuated by acts which the culture regards as violent, despicable and utterly unacceptable.

which will never be published, that a post-industrialized, increasingly stratified and compartmentalized society sets up barriers between classes which restrict social mobility, make it even less likely that wildly disparate gene stocks can meet.

I don't like any of these ideas much. It is perhaps unfortunate but nonetheless inescapable: I have to put a disclaimer on the record here. I don't like xenophobia or its manifestations in the life I lead; I don't think that destiny is completely based upon biology (because if it was most of us

But all of these, I submit, are issues of some real and practical concern; a literature which among many other things proposes to be an instrument of social inquiry should be able to deal with these issues, should not face their *prime facie* exclusion. But these are not stories that are going to come to your local science fiction or book publisher anytime soon, nor will the comedies of Nazism or the merry, satirical investigations of the reading of science fiction or fantasy literature as surrogates for genuine social role-playing.

Eugene McCarthy said many years ago about campaigning for the Presidency, "Unfortunately, wanting the job really disqualifies you for it," and any strident insistence upon the right of writers and editors to investigate these issues will to the exact degree of its insistence finish one off within the commercial category with prematurity and finesse. Flowers blushing all unseen: thus our words unspoken. ♦



Looking Forward:

# The Caterpillar's Question

by Piers Anthony  
and Philip José Farmer

Coming in October 1992 from Ace Books

*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

Two of today's most imaginative writers have pooled their talents to create a well-crafted novel that combines intrigue, philosophy, humor, and a unique alien threat into a fantastic science-fictional adventure.

The novel begins at what could be any intersection in any American city. Jack has been hired to drive an exceptional child across the country. The pay was enough to make him take the job without a second thought, but soon he comes to realize that things are not what he expected.

They had told Jack they thought it was psychosomatic. She could talk if she wanted to, and might even recover the sight of one eye. But it had taken seven years to obtain the grant from the foundation, and now she was thirteen.

He glanced at her, sitting stiff and tight in the passenger bucket. Her dark hair was cut so short it was boyish, but the gentle bulges in the heavy man's shirt she wore belied any boyhood or childhood. One hand toyed indifferently with the buckle of her seat belt, and under the cotton skirt the shiny length of a metal brace paralleled her left leg. Her sharp chin pointed forward, but of course she was not watching anything.

The horn of the car behind him blared as the light changed. Jack shifted and edged out. He wasn't even certain which city this was; the hours of silent driving had grown monotonous.

"Are you ready to stop, Tappy?" But she did not answer or make any sign. He knew she heard and understood—but he was still a stranger, and she was afraid. Had they even bothered to tell her where she was going, or why?

For the First Time Ever...  
A Stunning Collaboration by the Two Bestselling Masters of Fantasy!

PIERS ANTHONY  
A • N • D  
PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

*The*  
**Caterpillar's  
Question**

Cover art by Romas

Tappuah Concord, maimed at the age of six, in the accident that killed her father. She had never known her mother, and the nearest of kin that took her in had not been pleased with the burden. Jack had no doubt they had made this plain to the little girl many times.

He pulled into a roadside restaurant. His job was to transport her safely to the clinic. She couldn't cover a thousand miles without eating.

Why hadn't they sent her by plane, so that all this driving was unnecessary? No, the plane was out of the question. Tappy surely still remembered that last trip in her father's little flier. Apparently there had been a miscalculation, and they had crashed. Jack had not inquired about the details, for Tappy had been there listening, and he had never been one for pointless cruelty.

He got out, opened her door, unsnapped her seat belt, slipped his hands under her arms, and lifted her to her feet. They had warned him about this; too: there was often no way to make her come except to *make her come*. Anywhere. Otherwise she might simply sit there indefinitely, staring sightlessly ahead. He felt awkward, putting his hands on her, but she did not seem to notice.

They took a corner table, enduring the interminable wait for their order. He was super-conscious of the glances of others, but Tappy seemed oblivious of her surroundings. She kept her hands in her lap, eyes downcast and inquisitive, and he saw too clearly the narrow white scar that crossed one eye and terminated at the mutilated ear. What did his petty embarrassment mean, compared to her problems?

"Lookit, that girl's ear's gone!" exclaimed a younger boy at a neighboring table, his voice startlingly loud. There was a fierce shushing that was worse than the remark because it confirmed its accuracy. Heads turned, first toward the boy, then toward the object of the boy's curiosity.

A slow tear started down Tappy's left cheek.

Jack stood up so suddenly that his chair crashed backward, and he stepped around the table and caught her arm and brought her out of that place. It was as if he had tunnel vision; all he saw was the escape route, the room and people fuzzing out at the periphery. They made it to the car, strapped in, and he drove, arrowing down the highway at a dangerous velocity. He was first numb, then furious—but he wasn't sure at what.

Gradually he cooled, and knew that the worst of the situation had been his own reaction. It was too late to undo what damage he might have done, but he could at least be more sensible henceforth. He schooled himself not to react like that, no matter what happened next time.

But first he had something more difficult to do. "Tappy, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I just—" He faltered, for she was not reacting at all. "I'm sorry."

She might as well have been a statue.

At dusk, he drew up to a motel and left Tappy in the seat while he registered for two rooms. He took her to one of them and sat her on the bed. He crossed the street and bought a six-pack of fruit drinks and two submarine sandwiches for their supper. Class fare it was not, but it was all he could think of at the moment.

He set things up precariously on the bed in her room, and was glad to see that she had a good appetite. She evidently was not used to this particular menu, but was experienced with bedroom meals. His pleasure became concern as he thought about it. Had they ever let her eat at the table, family style? He could see why they might not have, but it bothered him anyway. There was a human being inside that tortured shell!

His thoughts drifted to his own motives. Why had he taken this job? A week before he'd have laughed if someone had predicted he'd be sitting on a motel bed eating supper with a blind girl almost ten years his junior. But he hadn't realized how hard it would be for a budding artist with one year of college to get a decent summer job.

Jack had kicked around for two, three years—he didn't know exactly where the time went—before running into Donna. Then suddenly he had the need to make something of himself. So he went to college and studied art. Did okay, too; he did have talent. But by the time he got it together, Donna had drifted elsewhere. He never even got to tell her of the effect she had on his motivation. He grieved, of course, and considered giving it up. But he discovered that life did go on, and there might even be other girls on the horizon.

Meanwhile, he needed wherewithal to continue college; that kept him busy around the edges. He soon realized that he was not likely to make it by washing dishes at joints that had never heard of the minimum wage scale, or taking any of the other menial positions for which one year of art seemed to qualify him.

The ad had offered a thousand dollars plus liberal expenses and the use of a good car for one week's light work. It had seemed too good to be true, and he was amazed to learn that the job hadn't been taken. No, it didn't involve drugs or anything illegal; it was just chauffeuring. If he had a valid license and a good record . . .

The job was to deliver Tappy to the clinic across the country. He assumed that it was legal for him to transport this child, or they would not have hired him. He needed the money, and didn't ask too many questions. He had no idea that jobs like this existed! If he could find a couple more like this, at similar pay scales, his next year of college would be assured.

They had covered four hundred miles today. At this rate he'd have Tappy at the clinic the day after tomorrow, and could be back two days early. The pay was for the job, not the time, so he had nothing to lose by being prompt. If the girl didn't talk, at least she wasn't much trouble. After this he'd get sandwiches and they'd eat in the car, avoiding restaurants entirely.

Jack cleaned up the mess of crumbs and told Tappy he'd check on her in the morning. "You can find your way around the room okay? Bathroom's in a straight line from the bed, and there's a radio. I'm in the next unit if you need me. Just yell."

He paused, embarrassed, remembering that she was mute, or chose to be. "I mean, you can bang on the wall or something. That okay?" Slowly she nodded, and he was relieved. She responded so little that he was never

quite sure she understood him. "Good. Now get some sleep. I'll knock before I come in, so I won't catch you by surprise." That was his concession to the woman aspect of her; she had to have time to cover up if she happened to be changing.

It all seemed simple enough.

But in the morning he found her sitting there still, shivering, the moisture squeezing hopelessly out of one eye. She might have moved about during the night, but the dark patches under her eyes showed she had not slept.

"Why?" he demanded incredulously. "Why didn't you summon me, if you couldn't sleep?"

She answered him only with that catatonic passivity, and a tear. Evidently there was something he had missed.

He told her to go to the bathroom while he fetched breakfast, and she did. He told her to change her clothing while he faced into a corner, and she did. He no longer trusted her to do things in his absence, but he intended to treat her with propriety. They ate, and got back on the road.

Jack pondered the event of the night as he drove, deeply disturbed. He had not mistreated Tappy, and there had been no trouble, except for the business at the restaurant. He had spoken to her and had supper with her, and she had not been crying then. She didn't seem to be afraid of him, though he wouldn't have blamed her for that. So what was bothering her?

He was taking her to the clinic that might bring back her sight and make her talk. She should be happy.

"Don't you want to see again?" he asked her. "I mean, there's all kinds of scenery out here. We're in New York State now—"

She turned suddenly toward him, startling him into silence. He glanced at her, but her face showed no emotion. After a moment she straightened out again.

There *was* something! This was her first voluntary response to him. She had reacted to something he had said. Was it his question about her sight?

"You do want to see?" he repeated. But this time there was no reaction. Apparently she had acted without thought, but now she had clamped down again.

She couldn't *want* to stay blind! Maybe his question had deserved no answer. Yet she had reacted. There had to be something she knew that he didn't.

Was it really a clinic she was destined for? Or had that been something they told him to obtain his cooperation? Now that he thought about it, there were a number of funny things about this whole arrangement. If they had so much money for specialists, and enough to pay him so generously for unskilled labor, why hadn't they done something about her ear? Comparatively minor cosmetic surgery could have eliminated most of the scar tissue on her face, too. And there had to be something better than that ugly metal brace on her leg. She wasn't paralytic; the leg should have mended by now.

And why hadn't they hired a professional nurse for this trip? Nurses could drive. This was a gearshift car, but only because he had asked for it; he preferred to do his own driving. They could have gotten an automatic

shift for a nurse. Why had they been so happy to trust him, a male stranger? They had hardly checked his credentials, which were minimal. The only virtue he seemed to have was ignorance. Yet for three days Tappy was in his hands. Anything could happen. Legally she was still a child—but she was a woman-child.

He drove on, no longer in a hurry. The doubt kept spiraling through his mind, growing uglier with every loop. If not a clinic, *what?*

Tappy wouldn't talk to him, so he talked to her, just to keep his mind off whatever unthinkable thing it sought. He read out the stupid billboards as they threaded their way through the complex of Schenectady, Albany, and Troy. He cursed out the other drivers. He kept up a meaningless monologue. Anything to fill the air with sound and keep his mind at bay.

Jack did not allow himself to wonder why he was deviating from the direct route marked on his map. He just drove where the scenery looked best.

Finally, as evening came to the highway, he felt a soft touch on his arm. He looked, and found her slumped like a straw doll, sleeping.

This was the supreme compliment. Tappy would not speak, but she now trusted him enough to sleep.

Jack realized then, coincidentally, why she had reacted when he had talked to her initially. It had been the first time he had spoken to her without an imperative. He had started to describe the scenery they were passing. Perhaps it had been a long time since anyone had talked to her about anything that might interest her.

He drove more carefully then, winding around the curves as the mountain ridge loomed high ahead, marking the physique of the state of Vermont. Just before the road seemed fated to plunge suicidally into the sheer wall of mountain, it spun aside, and there was a pretty town. He found a motel and stopped.

She was sleeping as he carried her into the unit and placed her on the bed. He took off her shoes, having a little trouble with the brace; the metal passed all the way under the foot and was awkward to get around. Tappy's feet and legs were well formed, however, and though she was light, her skeletal structure was good.

Jack left her and turned out the light as he closed the door. Sleep was more important than food at the moment. He hoped she would lie undisturbed until morning.

She did and she didn't. In the night he woke, hearing a voice. Someone was in Tappy's room. He went there, but there was no one. Tappy was lying on the bed—and talking. The words were slurred, almost indistinguishable.

He paused, realizing that she was not awake. She was talking in her sleep! That was the one time her emotional barrier was down, and her voice was freed.

Then out of that gibberish, some words appeared. He listened, fascinated. "Empire of the stars," she said, if he understood correctly. Then: "Reality is a dream."

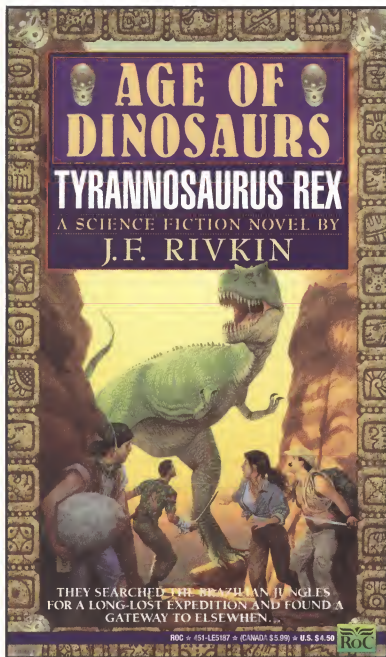
But after that she turned over, and there were no more words. He withdrew, excited. So what if she was muttering about some television program she had overheard? *She could talk!* ♦

Looking Forward:

# Tyrannosaurus Rex

by J. F. Rivkin

Coming in October 1992 from Roc Books



Cover art by Denis Beauvais

*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

Some books are enjoyable not just because they're well written, but also because they're just plain fun. *Tyrannosaurus Rex* is an exciting story populated with realistic characters and non-stop action. The story begins when the niece of a long-missing surveyor and explorer discovers a dinosaur bone in a trunk she inherited. To everyone's amazement, the bone is fresh—not a fossil. Battling past local villains, Christine and her companions find a Mayan temple that contains a gate into the past. Could this explain the mysterious disappearance of the Mayan culture at its height?

This excerpt picks up the action just as the group passes through that gate for the first time.

The floor spun away, the walls exploded. They were engulfed in a swirl of motion. Light flashed and a blue sky erupted into view. Somewhere, something was screaming. Waves of nausea welled up from their guts and they all vomited.

Gasping, dazed, they looked up into a hot, orange sun. "Mother of God," Raeder cried out. "It is an earthquake." He panicked and tried to run, but Tony grabbed him. "Let me go," Raeder screamed, twisting and thrashing.

"There's nowhere to go," Tony shouted. "Calm down. It's not an earthquake."

Raeder's knees buckled. Tony gently let him sag to the ground. "What is happening?" he groaned. "Where are we?"

"Damned if I know," Tony said, looking around. "But I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Raeder snarled. "Who's Toto? We were never in Kansas. Have you lost your mind?"

"Are you all right, Chris?" Tony asked, putting his arms around her. She was staring around, stupefied. She nodded, swallowing hard.

He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "Say something," he demanded.

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

"Terrific. Have we concluded this conversation?"

He kissed her. "You're wonderful, Chris."

"I know that," she said, with real irritation in her voice. "This hardly seems the time to be mouthing platitudes, Tony."

Tony looked at Manny and shrugged. Manny shrugged back. "I take it you're fine?" Tony asked him.

"I am fine, but I do not understand. Where the hell are we? What happened?"

Tony shook his head slowly. "We were standing in that little room and then . . . presto." Bewildered, he looked at the strange hills that surrounded them. There was no sign of the Mayan city or their camp.

He hefted his shotgun. "At least this came with us. What else have we got?"

Manny answered, "The torches, our guns, some cartridges. We each have knives. Christine's got her Polaroid. I've got a packet of meat . . . that's about it. It's just what we took into the temple. We never intended to leave camp." Manny looked around again. "Have any of you ever seen trees like this?"

The trees' trunks were curved into gentle arches, their bark marked with a coarse diamond pattern. Instead of leaves, there were large fronds, each approximately three feet long, covered in prickles.

Tony said, "They're a bit like trees I've seen in Florida. And look at these ferns all over the ground." He kicked at the undergrowth. "This is simply not the rain forest of Brazil. We're in a totally different place."

"You know what it reminds me of?" Christine asked. Manny and Tony looked at her. "Promise you won't laugh," she said.

"Spit it out, Chris," Tony said impatiently.

"Some movies I've seen," she said reluctantly.

"What movies?" Tony demanded. "Where do you think we are? Hollywood?"

"We could be for all I know. But this place looks like the backdrop for several big lizard films I've wasted precious moments of my life watching." Despite her flippant words, her voice was tight and frightened.

"I do not understand you," Manny said, looking very puzzled. "What is a big lizard film?"

"Oh, you know, people go through a crack in the earth, or they're in a balloon that's blown off course, and they end up in some place filled with gila monsters that have frills pasted onto their backs—dinosaurs, all that. There's always this sort of greenery. Also, I think I remember seeing something like this at the Natural History Museum, when Tony and I went there. They had a gallery of dinosaurs and it had a few dioramas. Remember, Tony?" He looked at her incredulously.

"It was just a thought," she said feebly. "After all, Percy was always looking for a lost world. Remember the Conan Doyle story." She looked first at Tony, then at Manny. "Forget it," she said. "Just forget I said anything."

"I told you the place was cursed," Raeder said vehem-

ently. "We are being punished for violating their temple. The earth has swallowed us up. You would not listen—now we are in Hell."

Tony ignored him. "Chris," he said faintly, "do you remember that dinosaur bone you found in your grandfather's trunk? Remember how the doctor said it wasn't anywhere near old enough—that it was some sort of hoax?" Christine's eyes widened.

"What is all this?" Manny demanded. "What bone?"

Together, Tony and Christine told him the story, "It was really the beginning of this expedition," Christine said. "I was looking for an excuse to do something different . . . to prove I wasn't just a layabout."

"I got all excited about finding this odd bone and then, when it seemed like it was a fake because it was clearly of rather recent manufacture, I went through a terrible letdown." She shrugged. "I wanted something magical and extraordinary in my life very badly, and it brought back stories about Grandfather, so I decided to retrace his footsteps. Now that I think of it, none of it makes any sense."

"I think I understand," Manny said. "After all, I have spent much of my life avoiding the ordinary and so has Tony. Of course," he said, looking around, "this does seem to be a bit extreme."

"I wonder if that bone really was a fake," Tony said. "Do you think Percy actually found some sort of hidden world filled with prehistoric animals?"

"Tony," Christine said nervously, "do you remember Dr. Langley telling us that bone belonged to a *Tyrannosaurus rex*?"

"Shit," Tony said. He looked at his shotgun.

"Would that kind of gun be any good against it?" Christine asked.

"It might use it as a toothpick after dinner," he said, feeling a little sick.

"Those are the really big ones, aren't they?" Manny asked. Christine and Tony nodded. "With the teeth and the little arms in front?" he continued, holding his arms in front of him like a dog begging. They nodded again. "We've got to get out of here," he said.

"But where is here?" Raeder demanded. "How do we get back when we don't know where we are?"

"I'm scared," Christine said flatly.

Suddenly, Tony tensed. He motioned everyone to be quiet. "I'm sure I felt something—some sort of tremor," he whispered. They all froze. In the distance, they heard a rumble like thunder.

"Do you think there's a storm coming?" Christine asked, looking into the sky. It was a limpid blue.

"That was never thunder," Manny said. "Something's moving. It sounds like a herd of animals—big ones."

"Quick, everyone get up on that knoll, behind the trees," Tony ordered.

The wind changed, bringing with it a rank, heavy, animal odor. The smell made them cough a little and they covered their mouths to muffle the noise. Tony pushed them farther back, away from the noise which had taken on the heavy, pounding sound of pistons moving in a powerful machine.



Cautiously, they looked down and saw the fronds part. For an instant, Christine convinced herself she was seeing a small group of rhinoceroses push their way into the clearing.

A group of gigantic reptiles were feeding placidly on the trees' leaves. The adults looked to be about thirty feet long from their beaked snouts to the tips of their tails, and about ten feet high at the shoulder. A pair of long, sharp horns projected from their foreheads, while a short horn projected from their snouts. A thick, frilled plate lay over their necks. Dull gray-green in color, they blended in well with the trees and vegetation.

The smallest—the young—stayed close to the center of the herd while the largest, which Christine assumed were male, stood on the outskirts.

She leaned toward Tony and whispered, "I know it's silly, since this is only a dream and not really happening, but I think I'm going to scream."

"Don't you dare, because if you do, I'll feed you to one of those things. What are they, besides large?"

"I believe they're *Triceratops*," she said, numbly.

"They seem to be vegetarians, if that's any consolation."

"Not much."

"They are monsters," Raeder said. "If these are the animals, what are the people like? Are they giants, too?"

"I doubt there are any people," Christine said. "These things lived well before people—in our world, at any rate. Unless we really are on a Hollywood set."

Manny tugged at her sleeve. "Christine," he whispered, "take a picture. No one's ever going to believe this."

"Good idea." She raised the camera and clicked the shutter. There was a burst of light—the flash had gone off.

The animals wheeled and bellowed in panic. The largest male, spotting the intruders on the knoll, pawed the ground very much like an enraged bull. Then he charged toward them, his horns lowered.

Everything happened in the wink of an eye, and everything happened as slowly as if they were underwater, moving through a medium that resisted every movement.

It seemed impossible for something so immense to move so quickly. They stared at the violent black streak racing to meet them. Then, the blur defined itself. The horns glinted in the bright sun. The mouth snapped open and shut like a turtle's. And, in the middle of all this fury were the tiny eyes, cold and expressionless.

Manny fired the shotgun. The explosion echoed in their ears. The animal slowed, startled and afraid. Manny fired again and he bellowed, wheeled, and ran. The herd, taking its cue from the leader, retreated. Then they were gone, leaving only the trampled ground as evidence that they had ever been there.

Tony grabbed Manny and hugged him. "You saved us, you lecherous bastard."

Manny shrugged. "It was nothing." He was trembling.

Christine was laughing and crying at the same time. "How did you know it would work?"

"I didn't. It was the only thing I could think of. Frankly, I was not sanguine. I am very surprised to be alive."

"I'll bet this is the first time anyone's fired a gun here," Tony said. "I don't think this place is big on technology."

"Did you get the picture, Christine?" Manny asked.

"I . . . oh, dear . . ." She pointed at the undeveloped negative lying on the ground. It was completely smeared, except for the distinct mark of a muddy boot heel.

"Ah, well," Manny sighed. "There will be other chances."

"God, I hope not," Christine said fervently.

Sitting on the ground, Raeder looked at them with blank eyes. Gingerly, he moved his hands over his body, assuring himself that he was alive and in one piece. For the first time in many years, he whispered a prayer.

Manny overheard the mumbled words and looked down at him. "I did not know you are a religious man."

"I am a practical man. We need help. I do not care where it comes from." He wiped sweat from his forehead.

Overhead, they heard a shrill cry. They looked up and saw a large leather-winged creature gliding in the clear blue sky. As it caught each updraft, it rose high and then swooped down again toward the ground. A long, bony crest extended several feet beyond the back of its skull. When it came in close view, Tony saw its huge wingspread and the large, wickedly pointed beak.

"Ever seen *that* in *King Kong*?" he asked Christine, trying to sound jovial.

"Something very like it," she answered soberly. "It almost carried off the heroine for brunch." She looked at the flying reptile. "It looks a little like a pterodactyl."

Moodily, Tony shielded his eyes and stared off into the distance. He badly wanted to see something that would assure him of his sanity.

"You know what's odd?" Christine asked.

"Why, no, whatever strikes you as odd?" he said bitterly.

Ignoring his tone, she said, "It must mean something that these animals are so familiar. After all, if we'd somehow been transported to Mars, wouldn't we be seeing sentient vegetables or creatures with three heads?"

"I suppose," Tony said. "Shall we take as a working assumption that we are on the planet Earth, although we don't know where?"

"Or when," Christine added. Everyone looked at her. "It does look a bit prehistoric," she said hesitantly. Tony shut his eyes for a moment. He was getting a headache.

Slowly he opened them, half hoping he would wake up in his own apartment, in his own bed. The unbroken view of hills and trees presented itself again. Then he started. There was a break in the pattern. On the side of the hill opposite, against a jumble of rock, was a tumbled pile of branches. It had an oddly structured look to it, as if the crisscrossing of wood and leaves was not totally random. There was a hint of ruin about it and of abandoned intent.

"Manny, what do you think of that over there against the stones?" He directed Manny's eyes to the huddle of sticks and fronds.

For a moment, Manny was utterly still. Then he looked hard at Tony. "Someone built that," he said flatly.

Raeder and Christine craned their necks, trying to see. "Let's go," Tony said. "If there are other people here, we've got to find them. We need answers." Without another word, they started down the hill. ♦

# Tomorrow's Books

October 1992 releases

Compiled by Susan C. Stone  
and Bill Fawcett

**Mary Elizabeth Allen, ed.: *All Hal-  
lows' Eve: Tales of Love and the Su-  
pernatural*, Walker and Company,  
hc, 256 pp, \$19.95.** Stories by sixteen  
authors of romance, fantasy, SF, and  
horror, including Joan Aiken, Morgan  
Llywelyn, Andre Norton, Marvin Kaye,  
and S. N. Lewitt.

**Piers Anthony: *Alien Plot*, Tor SF,  
hc, 256 pp, \$18.95.** A collection of short  
fiction, including the previously unpub-  
lished novella "Alien Plot."

**John Barnes: *A Million Open Doors*,  
Tor SF, hc, 320 pp, \$19.95.** The advent  
of instantaneous travel has shattered the  
barriers that kept humanity's Hundred  
Worlds apart, throwing carefully engi-  
neered societies into turmoil.

**John Barnes: *Orbital Resonance*,  
Tor SF, pb rep, 224 pp, \$3.99.** Melpo-  
mene Murray and her space-born class-  
mates have been trained from birth to  
lead mankind into the future, but Melpo-  
mene has plans of her own.

**Gregory Benford and Martin Harry  
Greenberg, eds.: *Alternate Americas*,  
Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 336 pp,  
\$4.99.** Volume 4 in the *What Might  
Have Been* series. An anthology explor-  
ing what might have been if the discovery  
and exploration of America had gone dif-  
ferently. Stories by Robert Silverberg, L.  
Sprague de Camp, Harry Turtledove, Es-  
ther Friesner, James Morrow, and others.

**Elizabeth Boyer: *Clan of the War-  
lord*, Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 272  
pp, \$4.99.** Norse myth and high spirits  
blend when a young witch swears a  
blood oath to join a ragtag band of boys  
who are going into battle against her  
parents' slayers.

**Jeff Bredenberg: *The Dream Vessel*,  
AvoNova SF, pb orig, 240 pp, \$4.50.**  
Rebel leader Rosenthal Webb needs a  
great sailing ship to help spread the  
message of freedom and explore what's  
left after nuclear devastation. But that re-  
quires consorting with slavers, pirates  
and cutthroats, and matching wits with  
mysterious Pec-Pec—Rasta God, thief  
and trickster.

**Chris Brodien-Jones: *The Dream-  
keepers*, Bradbury Press, YA Fantasy,  
hc, 144 pp, \$13.95.** The Dreamkeepers  
resist the dark dreams and endless snow  
sent against them, but only Derek Morgan  
can retrieve the one thing that can  
defeat their enemy and free them all.

**Jack L. Chalker: *Masters of Flux  
and Anchor*, Tor SF, pb reiss, 432 pp,  
\$4.99.** *Soul Rider* Book Three. Mervyn,  
wizard and Fluxlord, faces the ultimate  
threat as the Seven Who Wait plan to  
open the Hellgates, portals to unknow-  
able danger and great power.

**C. J. Cherryh: *The Goblin Mirror*,  
Del Rey Fantasy, hc, 304 pp, \$19.00.**  
When the land is overrun by hordes of  
ravening goblins, three princes go to  
battle, helped by a young witch armed  
with a shard of the Goblin Queen's en-  
chanted mirror.

**pb reiss:** paperback reissue, designat-  
ing a title that was previously pub-  
lished in paperback but has been out of  
print.

**pb rep:** paperback reprint, designat-  
ing a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (some-  
times expressed as **first time in pb**).  
**tr pb:** trade paperback, a format us-  
ing pages larger than a paperback but  
generally smaller than a hardcover.

**Adrian Cole: *Mother of Storms*,  
AvoNova Fantasy, pb orig, 384 pp,  
\$4.99.** The remnants of humankind came  
across the dimensions to Innasmorn to  
escape the alien Csendook. But the sor-  
cerers of this place vow to cleanse their  
world of the human "abomination" . . .  
and the relentless Csendook are close at  
hand. Book 1 in the *Star Requiem* series.

**Tom Deitz: *Dreambuilder*, AvoNova  
Fantasy, pb orig, 432 pp, \$4.99.** Se-  
quel to *Soulsmith*. Ronny Dillon has  
been avoiding his magical heritage, but  
an urgent summons draws him back to  
confront his destiny in the ancestral  
mansion where his past was erased, his  
dreams damaged and his future very  
nearly destroyed.

**Troy Denning: *The Amber En-  
chantress*, TSR, Inc., pb orig, 352 pp,  
\$4.95.** A novel of the DARK SUN™ world  
and Book 3 of the *Prism Pentad*. The  
Sorceress Sadira journeys to the Pristine  
Tower and meets her lost father.

**Gordon R. Dickson: *The Outposter*,  
Baen SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99.** Aliens  
raided and slaughtered with impunity on  
Earth's far-flung colonial outposts, until  
orphaned survivor Mark Ten Roos grew  
up and set out to stop the bloodshed.

**YA:** young adult.





**Gordon R. Dickson: *Wolfing*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$2.95.** After an expedition from Earth reaches Alpha Centauri III and discovers we are not the only human race, Earth's humans try to prove we are more than just a lost colony.

**Debra Doyle and James D. MacDonald: *The Price of the Stars*, Tor SF, pb orig, 448 pp, \$4.50.** The centuries-long conflict between the human Republic and the Mageworlds has been over for 30 years. But now an assassination threatens to shatter the peace, and the victim's daughter finds herself in the thick of Galactic intrigue.

**Gardner Dozois: *Geodesic Dreams: The Best Short Fiction of Gardner Dozois*, St. Martin's SF, hc, 288 pp, \$19.95.** Including many previously uncollected stories and two Nebula Award winners, with an introduction by Robert Silverberg.

**Lionel Fenn: *668: The Neighbor of the Beast*, Ace SF, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.99.** Staying next door to the decaying mansion at number 666 Langford Place, out-of-work actor Kent Montana is on the spot when a collection of vile gods and demons make a haunted house call from beyond time and space.

**Alan Dean Foster: *Star Trek Log Four*, Del Rey SF, pb reiss, \$4.99.** Adventures of James T. Kirk and the *Enterprise*, based on the animated series. New cover by David Mattingly.

**Esther M. Friesner: *Yesterday We Saw Mermaids*, Tor SF/Fantasy, hc, 192 pp, \$16.95.** As Columbus's ships set sail from Spain, a boatload of nuns, transported by an unruly genie, discover a New World unlike any other.

**Mary Gentle: *Rats and Gargoyles*, Roc Fantasy, pb rcp, 480 pp, \$5.99.** In the mythic realm of the "heart of the world," where humankind is enslaved and god-claemons mean to end all existence,

the powerful White Crow organizes an uprising against the powers of chaos.

**Roland Green: *Vain Command*, Roc SF, pb orig, 384 pages, \$4.99.** In Book 4 of the *Star Cruiser Shenandoah* series, the warriors of the *Shenandoah* are pitted against human spies recruited by the reptilian Merishi as they fight to keep a crisis from becoming a war.

**W. A. Harbinson: *Dream Maker*, Walker and Company, SF/Environmental thriller, hc, 250 pp, \$21.95.** NASA pilot Tony Rydell discovers what is destroying the ozone layer, but the only person who believes him is ex-astronaut Clare Holton. They confront the Dream Maker, a mysterious force that feeds off people's minds and sends them into an alien world where the line between dream and reality erodes.

**Simon Hawke: *The Nine Lives of Calseye Gomez*, Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99.** This spin-off from the *Wizard of 4th Street* series features a tough-talking gumshoe who happens to be a cat.

**D. J. Heinrich: *The Tainted Sword*, TSR, Inc., pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95.** First in a new line of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS™ novels. An aging knight, a wife, and his young squire have to face an evil green dragon.

**E. W. Hildick: *The Case of the Weeping Witch*, Macmillan Books, YA fantasy, hc, 160 pp, \$13.95.** Using their specially powered walkie-talkies, McGurk and his friends travel back to 1692 to get to the bottom of a mystery about a New England witch hunt.

**James Hogan: *Entoverse*, Del Rey SF, 1st time in pb, 416 pp, \$4.99.** Fourth book in the *Glanis* series. Hard SF treatment of virtual reality and sentient computers.

**Jessica Horsting and James Van Hise, eds.: *The Best of Midnight Graf-***

*fitti*, Warner Horror, pb orig, 400 pp, \$5.99. A collection of stories from the horror magazine *Midnight Graffiti*, including the first book publication of "Rainy Season" by Stephen King.

**Diana Wynne Jones: *A Sudden Wild Magic*, Avon/Morrow Fantasy, hc, 400 pp, \$22.00.** A magical invasion sends the Guardian Ring of England, a group of eccentric witches, on a journey to an alternate world where they find a repressive society, true love, and a very wicked witch.

**Robert Jordan: *The Dragon Reborn*, Tor Fantasy, first time in pb, 704 pp, \$5.99.** The story of the long-propheesied leader who will save the world, but in saving it will destroy it. Book III of the *Wheel of Time* series.

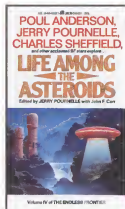
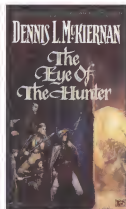
**Robert Jordan: *The Great Hunt*, Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 736 pp, \$5.99.** The legendary Horn of Valere, said to be capable of raising the dead heroes of the ages, is found . . . and then stolen. Book II of the *Wheel of Time* series.

**Robert Jordan: *The Eye of the World*, Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 832 pp, \$5.95.** In the Third Age, an age of prophecy, a shadow lies over the Land. And the World and Time themselves hang in the balance. Book I of the *Wheel of Time* series.

**William H. Keith, Jr.: *Nomads of the Sky*, TSR, Inc., pb orig, 288 pp, \$3.95.** A science-fiction adventure in the XXV™ book line, the second novel in the *Invaders of Charon* series.

**Rudyard Kipling: *John Brunner presents Kipling's Science Fiction*, Tor SF, hc, 192 pp, \$17.95.** A collection of Kipling's SF stories with introduction and annotations by Brunner.

**Mercedes Lackey: *By The Sword*, DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, 496 pp, \$5.99.** The granddaughter of a great sorceress must master her own special powers to



save all she treasures from the evils of mage-backed war.

**Mercedes Lackey: *The Oathbound*, DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, 304 pp, \$4.99.** Book I of the *Vows and Honor* series. A Swordsman and a Sorceress are united by sword-spell and the will of the Goddess to fulfill their destiny.

**Mercedes Lackey: *Oathbreakers*, DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99.** Book II of the *Vows and Honor* series. Tarna and Kethry, bound by oath, sword, and spell, continue their journey and seek to wreak justice on an oathbreaker.

**Mercedes Lackey: *Winds of Fate*, DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, 464 pp, \$4.99.** Book One of *The Mage Winds* trilogy. In a realm imperiled by dark magic, Elspeth, heir to the throne, searches for a mentor who can teach her to use her powers to defend her kingdom.

**Mercedes Lackey: *Winds of Change*, DAW Fantasy, hc, 388 pp, \$20.00.** Book Two of *The Mage Winds* trilogy. Elspeth's quest continues, as she and the renegade Hawkbrother Adept Darkwind struggle to master long-forgotten magics in a region warped by evil spellcraft.

**Mercedes Lackey and Mark Shepherd: *Wheels of Fire*, Baen Fantasy, pb orig, \$4.99.** The second novel in the *Serrated Edge* series. When little Jamie Case is made prisoner of a radical cult, the only way his mother can rescue him is with the help of a fun-loving, hard-driving elf.

**Mercedes Lackey and Larry Dixon: *Born to Run*, Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, \$4.99.** The first novel in the *Serrated Edge* series. Wherever kids are in trouble, bad elves make things worse and good elves race to the rescue. But, good or bad, elves need money to survive in the real world. . . .

**Brian Lumley: *Psychosphere*, Tor Horror, pb orig, 416 pp, \$5.99.** The

second volume in a trilogy; sequel to *Psychomech*. An alien consciousness is sapping Garrison's mind, and he must defend not only himself but all Earth.

**Ian McDonald: *The Broken Land*, Bantam Spectra SF, tr pb orig, 336 pp, \$11.00.** A young woman journeys through a tragic, beautiful land in this story of violent conflict and healing love set in Earth's far future.

**Ian McDonald: *Speaking in Tongues*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99.** Eleven previously uncollected tales of magic, humor and realism. Only two of the stories have previously appeared in U. S. publications.

**Lee McKeone: *The Clone Crisis*, Questar SF, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99.** In this fourth Conek and Cage adventure, the team uncovers an evil crime consortium's plot to replace them with clones.

**Dennis L. McKiernan: *The Eye of the Hunter*, Roc Fantasy, tr pb orig, 624 pages, \$15.00.** The comet called the Eye of the Hunter is known as an ill omen in the land of Mithgar. Its dreaded return, after a thousand years, summons five brave souls to confront creatures of darkness and their evil master.

**Michael Moorcock: *The Bane of the Black Sword*, Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, 160 pp, \$4.50.** Fifth volume in the classic Elric saga.

**Larry Niven, creator: *Man-Kzin Wars V*, Baen SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$5.99.** Two new short novels in one volume. "Mother Lode" by Jerry Pournelle and S. M. Stirling follows the voyage of three drifters tracking down a legendary source of super technology. And in Thomas T. Thomas's "Hey Diddle Diddle," Kzinti and humans vie for possession of a weapon too horrible to use.

**Larry Niven, creator: *The Man-Kzin Wars*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 304 pp, \$4.99.** This series details the assault on

pacifist humanity by berserk feline warriors from the planet Kzin. The first volume contains short novels by Poul Anderson and Dean Ing.

**Larry Niven, creator: *Man-Kzin Wars II*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99.** The second volume in this series contains short novels by Jerry Pournelle and S. M. Stirling.

**Larry Niven, creator: *Man-Kzin Wars III*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99.** Short novels by Poul Anderson and Jerry Pournelle.

**Larry Niven, creator: *Man-Kzin Wars IV*, Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.95.** Short novels by Greg Bear, Donald Kingsbury and S. M. Stirling.

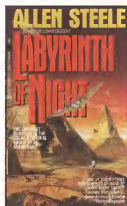
**Steve Perry: *Earth Hive*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99.** First novel in a series based on the Dark Horse graphic novels set in the universe of the *Aliens* movies.

**Tamara Pierce: *Wild Magic: The Immortals*, Atheneum Books, YA Fantasy, hc, 208 pp, \$14.95.** Daine has wild magic, the ability to communicate with animals, but she must develop it in new directions to fight the sinister powers threatening her home.

**Richard Pini: *Against the Wind*, Tor Fantasy, first mass market pb, 288 pp, \$4.99.** This fourth volume of the shared-world *The Blood of Ten Chiefs* series includes stories by Mercedes Lackey, Lynn Abbey, Nancy Springer, Diana L. Paxson, Len Wein and others.

**Daniel Pinkwater: *Borgel*, Aladdin Books, YA SF, pb rep, 176 pages, \$3.95.** A funny SF story for middle-grade readers about young Melvin Spellbound, whose Uncle Borgel takes him on an intergalactic road trip.

**Edited by Jerry Pournelle with John F. Carr: *Life Among the Asteroids*, Ace SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99.** Volume IV of *The Endless Frontier*. Ac-



claimed SF authors explore the factual and fictional possibilities of life in the Asteroid Belt.

**Byron Preiss: *The Vampire State Building*, Bantam YA fantasy, first time in pb, 112 pp, \$3.50.** Four short stories about a boy who shares his free time with a family of bats and the biggest imagination in the world.

**Mike Resnick: *Oracle*, Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99.** A return to the world of *Santiago and Soothsayer*. Grown to womanhood, precognitive psychic Penelope Bailey is caught in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse, dodging a bounty hunter, a government agent and an outlaw cyborg out for profit.

**Mike Resnick, ed.: *Whatdunits*, DAW SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99.** A collection of stories combining the science fiction and mystery genres.

**J. F. Rivkin: *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, Roc SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50.** First book in the *Age of Dinosaurs* time-travel trilogy, about an expedition searching the Brazilian jungles for traces of a long-lost explorer. They find instead a gateway to elsewhere.

**Mark Rogers: *The Riddled Man*, Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99.** The final battle between Good and Evil is joined in this last volume in the *Blood of the Lamb* trilogy.

**R. A. Salvatore: *The Legacy*, TSR, Inc., hc, 320 pp, \$15.95.** Set in the FORGOTTEN REALMS' fantasy world. A further battle between the drow, Drizzt Do'Uredin, and the Spider Queen.

**Dan Simmons: *The Hollow Man*, Bantam Spectra SF, hc, 304 pp, \$20.00.** SF, fantasy, and horror combine in this novel about a telepath's journey through the deepest, most private hells of other people's minds.

**Mike Sirota: *The Ultimate Bike Path*, Ace SF, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.99.**

Sequel to *Bicycling Through Space and Time*. Further funny adventures of Jack Miller, the cyclist whose mountain bike has an extra gear that moves him through time and space.

**S. P. Somtow: *Valentine*, Tor Dark Fantasy, hc, 384 pp, \$21.95.** The immortal Timmy Valentine returns to stalk L. A. in this sequel to *Vampire Junction*.

**Norman Spinrad: *Russian Spring*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb rep, 608 pp, \$5.99.** As Russia enters the European Community of the near future, an American engineer gives up his citizenship to realize his dream of going into space.

**Norman Spinrad: *Little Heroes*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb reiss, \$5.99.** In a violent near future, five little heroes set off an explosion in this novel of sex, rock, and revolution.

**Allen Steele: *Labyrinth of Night*, Ace SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$4.99.** When the Viking probe flew by Mars in 1976, we first saw *The Face* and *The City*. We wondered then if they were tricks of the light, abandoned artifacts, or occupied alien property. That question is about to be answered.

**Brad Strickland: *Dragon's Plunder*, Atheneum YA Fantasy, hc, 160 pp, \$14.95.** Jamie's magical ability to whistle up winds makes him a valuable prisoner after he's captured by pirates, especially when their journey brings them to a dragon's island, protected by fierce winds.

**Jules Verne: *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Tor Classics, pb reiss, 272 pp, \$2.50.** Verne's classic fantasy story.

**John Vornholt: *War Drums*, Pocket Books, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99.** Book #23 in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* series. When Klingons and Humans clash on the colony world of Selva, only Lieutenant Worf can prevent a

horrible massacre in time to escape Selva's deadly secret.

**Karl Edward Wagner, ed.: *The Year's Best Horror Stories XX*, DAW Horror, pb orig, 368 pp, \$5.50.** The 20th anniversary volume of the best stories by masters of the horror genre.

**Lawrence Watt-Evans: *The Rebirth of Wonder*, Tor Fantasy, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.99.** Art Dunham was happy to rent his father's small-town theater to an out of town troupe during the slow season. But this troupe is . . . different.

**Jordan K. Weisman, ed.: *Into the Shadows*, Roc Fantasy/FASA Special, pb orig, 336 pp, \$4.99.** An anthology of short stories set in the world of the bestselling *Shadowrun* series.

**Catherine Wells: *Children of the Earth*, Del Rey Discovery, SF, pb orig, 416 pp, \$4.99.** Sequel to *The Earth Is All That Lasts*. Time travel leads to conflict between Native Americans on a post-disaster Earth, and the returning colonists who left before the disaster.

**Tad Williams and Nina Kiriki Hoffman: *Child of an Ancient City*, Atheneum Books, YA Fantasy, hc, 144 pp, \$14.95.** A party of travelers is trapped by a vampy into a storytelling contest. If the humans win, it means freedom; if the vampy wins, death.

**F. Paul Wilson: *The LaNague Chronicles*, Baen SF, pb orig, 672 pp, \$5.99.** Three-in-one volume containing *Healer*, *Wheels Within Wheels*, and *An Enemy of the State*. The centuries-spanning saga of an immortal healer who became a warrior to save the human race.

**Robert Charles Wilson: *A Bridge of Years*, Bantam Spectra SF, pb rep, 352 pp, \$4.99.** Tom Winter discovers a time tunnel that leads to Manhattan 1963—to a new life and love, and to the danger of a brutal soldier escaped from a bleak future.

# The Ship Who Searched

## Part Four: Skydancer

Anne McCaffrey  
and  
Mercedes Lackey

There was a message waiting for Tia when they returned to the main base at Central, with Doctor Haakon-Fritz still confined to quarters. A completely mysterious message. Just the words, "Call this number," a voice-line number for somewhere in the L-5 colonies, and an ID-code she recognized as being from Lars.

Now what was Lars up to?

Puzzled, she left the message in storage until Alex completed the complicated transfer of their not-quite-prisoner, and accompanied him and duplicated copies of the records involving him down to the surface. Only then, when she was alone, did she make the call.

"Friesner, Sherman, Stirling, and Huff," said a secretary on the first ring. There was no delay, so Tia assumed that the office was somewhere in one of the half-dozen stations or L-5 colonies nearby. "Investment brokers."

"I was told to call this number," Tia said cautiously. "I—my name is Hypatia Cade—" She hesitated as she almost gave her ship-numbers instead of her name.

"Ah, Miz Cade, of course," the secretary said, sounding pleased. "We've been waiting for you to call. Let me explain



Illustration by Todd Hamilton



the mystery; Friesner, Sherman, Stirling and Huff specialize in investments for shellpersons like yourself. A Mister Lars Valmenov at *Pride of Albion* opened an account for you here to manage the investments you'd already made. If you'll hold, I'll see if one of the partners is free—"

Tia *bated* to be put on hold, but it wasn't for more than a microsecond. "Miz Cade," said a hearty-sounding male voice, "I'm Lee Stirling. I'm your broker if you want to keep me on, and I have good news for you. Your investments at Largo Draconis have done *very* well. Probably much better than you expected."

"I don't know about that," she replied, letting a little humor leak through. "My expectations were pretty high." There was something about that voice that sounded familiar, but she couldn't identify it. Was it an accent—or rather, lack of one?

"But did you expect to triple your total investment?" Lee Stirling countered. "Your little seed money grew into quite the mighty oak tree while you were gone!"

"Uh—" she said, taken so much by surprise that she didn't know what to say. "What do you mean by total investment?"

"Oh . . . your companies split their bonds two times while you were gone; you had the option of cash or bonds, and we judged you wanted the bonds, at least while the value was still increasing." Stirling was trying to sound matter-of-fact, but couldn't keep a trace of gloating out of his voice. "Those bonds are now worth three times what they were after the last split."

"Split?" she said faintly. "I . . . uh . . . really don't know what that means. I'm . . . new at this."

Patently Stirling walked her through exactly what had happened to her investment. "Now the question you have in front of you is whether you want to sell out now, while the value of the bond is still increasing, or whether you want to wait."

"What's happening on Largo Draconis?" she asked. After all, *her* investment had been based on what was going to happen in the real world, not the strange and unpredictable universe of the stock market. And from the little she had seen, the universe of the stock market seemed to have very little to do with "real" reality.

"I thought you'd ask that. Your companies have pretty much saturated their market," Stirling told her. "The situation has stabilized—just short of disaster, thanks to them. The bond prices are going up, but a lot more slowly. I think they're going to flatten out fairly soon. I'd get out, if I were you."

"Do it," she said flatly. "I'd like you to put everything I earned into Moto Prosthetics, preferred stock, with voting rights. Hold onto the seed money until I contact you."

"Taking care of it now—there. All logged in, Hypatia. I'm looking forward to seeing what you're going to invest in next." Stirling sounded quite satisfied. "I hope you'll stay with us. We're a new firm, but we're solid, we have a lot of experience, and we intend to service our clients with integrity. Miz Friesner was formerly a senior partner in Weiskopf, Dixon, Friesner and Jacobs, and the rest of us were her handpicked proteges. She's our token sofie."

"Token—oh! You're all—"

"Shellpersons, right, all except Miz Friesner. Oh, we all worked on the stock, bond, and commodity exchanges, but as systems managers. We couldn't do any investments while we were systems managers, but Miz Friesner agreed to join us when we bought out our contracts." Stirling chuckled. "We've been planning this for a long time. Now we're relying on grapevine communications within the shell-net for those like us who want to invest, for whatever reasons—and would rather not go through either their Counselors, their Supervisors, or their Advocates." He sent her a complicated burst of emoticons conveying a combination of disgust, weariness, annoyance, and impatience. "We *are* adults, after all. We can think for ourselves. Just because we're rooted to one spot or one structure, it doesn't follow that all of us need keepers."

She sent back a burst that mirrored his—with the addition of amusement. "Some of us do—but not anyone who's been out in the world for more than fifty years or so, I wouldn't think. Well, I'll tell a couple of friends of mine about you, that's for certain."

"Word of mouth, as I said." Stirling laughed. "I have to tell you, after that phenomenal start, we're all very interested in your next investment choice."

"I'll have it in a couple of days at most," she promised, and signed off.

Well, now it was certainly time to start digging for that second choice, and she couldn't hope to happen on it the way she had the last time.

This time, it was going to take a combination of stupidity on someone's part, and her own computational power. So she concentrated on sorting out those colonies that had been in existence for less than a hundred years. It was probably fair to assume that anything repetitive that *she* would be able to take advantage of would have to take place within that kind of cycle.

That narrowed the field quite a bit—but it meant that she was going to have to concentrate her search by categories. Floods were the first things that came to mind, so she called up geological and climatological records on all her candidates and ran a search for flood-patterns.

Meanwhile she and Alex were also dealing with the authorities on the Haakon-Fritz case—which looked likely to put the Practical Darwinists out of business, at least with the general public—and the Institute in regard to resupply. Tia was determined not to leave port this time without that ethological tagging kit. Alex was tired of dealing with each crisis barehanded.

He demanded a supply of firearms—locked up until authorized if necessary, but he wanted to have *something* to enforce his decisions or to defend himself and others.

"What if Haakon-Fritz had gone berserk?" he asked. "What if those canids had been more aggressive?"

Courier Services was agreeable, but the Institute was fighting him; their long-time policy of absolute pacifism was in direct conflict with any such demand. The ban was clear; on any site where there were nearby sophonts with an Iron Age civilization or above—and "nearby" meant on the same continent—absolutely no arms were

to be permitted in association with any Institute personnel, not even those under contract. And since the Couriers hit at least one dig on every run that came under the ban, they were not allowed *any* weaponry at any time. Tia backed her brawn, and she was lobbying with CS and the Lab Schools to help. After all, *her* well-being was partially dependent on his. The Institute, on the other hand, was balking because there were those who would take the presence of even small arms on board the Courier in the worst possible interpretation.

Tia could see their point—but Institute Couriers were the only ones not carrying some kind of hand weaponry. They were likely at any time to run into smugglers, who absolutely *would* be armed. If CS made a ruling on the subject, there would be no way the Institute could get around it.

Meanwhile, on the subject of Haakon-Fritz, things were definitely heating up. The recordings of his Olympic sprint to shelter had somehow gotten leaked to the media—fortunately, long *after* Tia had locked down her copies—along with the following recording of Alex's heroic dash to the rescue via grav-sled. Alex was a minor celebrity for a day—but he successfully avoided the media, and they soon grew tired of his self-deprecating attitude and his refusal to make himself photogenic. Haakon-Fritz did not avoid the media; he sought them out—and became everyone's favorite villain. The Institute could not keep the incident quiet. The Practical Darwinists came to their proponent's rescue, and only made things worse with their public statements of support and their rhetoric. People did not care to hear that they were weaklings, failures, and ought to be done away with for the good of the race. It began to look as if there was going to be a public trial, no matter how hard the Institute tried to avoid one.

It was on the eve of that trial that Tia finally found her next investment project.

In the Azteca system, the third planet—predictably Terran—known as Quetzecoatl.

Interstellar Teleson, one of the major communications firms in their quadrant with cross-contracts and reciprocal agreements across known space, had just relocated their sector corporate headquarters on Quetzecoatl. The location had a great deal to be said for it—central, in the middle of a stable continental plate, good climate. That, however, was not why they had relocated there.

It was one of those secretly negotiated High Family contracts, and Tia had no doubt that there was a lot more at stake than just the area. Someone owed someone else a favor—or else someone wanted something else kept quiet, and this was the price.

She was doubly sure when the location came up red-flagged on her geological search. According to the survey records, that lovely, flat plain was a flood basin. Quetzecoatl did not have the kind of eccentric orbit that Largo Draconis did—just a little tilt. One that didn't affect anyone in the major settlements at all. But once every hundred years, that tilt angled the north pole into the solar plane for a bit longer than usual. The glaciers would start to melt. The plain below wouldn't exactly

"flood"—or at least, not all at once. It would just get very, very soggy, slowly; then, when the spring rains came, the water would rise over the course of a week or two. Eventually the entire plain would be under about two inches of water, and would remain that way for about three years, gradually drying again for the fourth as the glaciers in the north grew.

But Interstellar Teleson's Corporate Standards dictated that the most sensitive records and delicate instruments, and all their computer equipment, be installed permanently in sub-basements no less than four stories below surface level, to avoid any possibility of damage. Corporate Standards had been set to guard against human interference, not nature's. Corporate Standards evidently did not consider nature to be important.

Whoever was in charge of this project apparently completely disregarded the geological survey. Engineers complained about seepage, and warned of flooding; the reaction was to order extra sump pumps. Sump pumps were keeping the sub-basements tolerably dry *now*, but Tia guessed that they were going constantly just to keep up with ordinary ground water. They were not going to handle the flood.

Especially not when flood waters were seeping in through the ground floor walls and creeping over the door-sills.

According to the meteorological data, the glaciers were melting, and the spring rains were only a couple of months away.

Meanwhile, half a continent away, there was a disaster-recovery firm that specialized in data and equipment recovery. They advertised that they could duplicate an existing system in a month, and recover data from devices that had been immersed in salt water for over a year, or through major fires with extensive smoke damage. Interstellar Teleson was going to need them, and they didn't even know it. Besides, Lia liked the name. Whoever these people were, they had one heck of a sense of humor.

Chuckling to herself, Tia called Lee Stirling, and made her investment—then sent out another carefully worded letter to Crash and Burn Data Recovery, Limited.

The public trial of Doctor Haakon-Fritz was a ten-day circus. By then, Tia and Alex had far more serious things on their minds, and no time to waste on trivialities.

Tia's recordings, both at the site and in the main cabin, were a matter of public record now; and that was the only stake they had in the trial. The Institute only wanted to keep from looking too foolish. In return for that supply of small arms Alex demanded, they asked that he not testify at the trial, since anything he could say would only corroborate those records. They both knew what the Institute people were thinking; records were one thing, but a heroic participant, who just *might* sound impassioned—no, that was something they didn't want to see. *He* was willing—he reckoned it was a small price to pay. Besides, there was little he could add, other than becoming another source of media attention.

So while the media gathered, the quiet Institute lawyers and spokesmen tried to downplay the entire incident,

Alex got his arms-locked, and Tia her ethological kit as the price for their non-participation. And as they prepared to head out on a new round of duties, there came an urgent message.

The Institute contract was on hold; CS had another use for them as the only BB ship on base.

And they suddenly found themselves not only with a new agenda—but an entirely new employer.

"Kenny, what is all this about?" Tia asked, when the barrage of orders and follow-up orders concluded, leaving them with a single destination, an empty flight plan, and a "wait for briefing" message. So here they were, docked with the *Pride of Albion*, and the briefing was coming from Doctor Kennet Uhua-Sung.

"This," Doctor Kennet replied, grimly, sending the live-cam view of one of the isolation rooms.

Alex gasped. Tia didn't blame him.

The view that Doctor Kennet gave them of this, the *Pride of Albion's* newest isolation patient, was blessedly brief. It had been a human at one point. Now it was a humanoid-shaped mass of suffering. Somewhere in the mass of open sores were eyes, a mouth, a face. Those had been hands, once—and feet.

Tia was the first to recover. "Who is that," she asked sharply, "and what happened to him?"

"Who—we don't know," Kenny replied, his face completely without expression. "He was from a tramp freighter that left him when he didn't get aboard by liftoff time. We don't know if they expected something like this, or if they were just worried because one of their bogus crew turned up missing, but they burned out of Yamahatchi Station with a speed that simply didn't match their rather shabby exterior. He was under false papers, of course—and there isn't enough of his fingers or retinas left to identify him. And unless he's ever been a murder or crime-of-violence suspect, his DNA patterns could take years to match with his birth records."

Alex nodded. It wouldn't have been too difficult to deduce his ship; anyone logging into a Station hostel or hotel had to list his ship-of-origin as well as filing his papers. That information was instantly cross-checked with the ship; the ship had to okay the crewman's ID before he would be allowed to check in. Passengers, of course, used an entirely separate set of hotels.

"That kind of speed probably means a pirate or a smuggler," Alex said.

"I don't think there's much doubt of that," Kenny replied. "Well, when his logged time at the cheap hostel he'd checked into ran out, they opened the door to his room—found *that*—and very wisely slammed the door on him and reported him."

"What about the hostel personnel?" Tia asked.

"We have them all in isolation, but so far, thank the deity of your choice, none of them are showing any signs of infection."

"For which favor, much thanks," Alex muttered.

"Just what is it that he's got?" Tia asked, keeping her voice even and level.

Kenny shrugged. "Another Plague with no name. Sym-

toms are simple enough. Boils which become suppurating sores that seem to heal only to break open again. A complex of viruses and bacteria, reinforced with modified immune deficiency syndrome. So far, no cure. Decontamination sterilized the hostel room completely, and we haven't seen anyone else come down with this thing. And, thank the spirits of space, once he checked into the hostel, door-records show he never left his room."

"There is no reason for a pirate to come down with something like that," Tia pointed out. "But an artifact smuggler—"

"Precisely why I asked for you two," Kenny replied, "And precisely why the Institute loaned you to us. Oh, Alex, in case you wondered, I'm in this because, despite my specialty, I seem to have become the expert in diseases associated with archeology."

Alex cast an inquiring glance at her column. Tia knew what he was asking. Could this be the same disease their mysterious "Sinor" had told them about? Could it be that the man had given them a true story, though not his true name?

She printed her answer under Dr. Kenny's image. *It's a coincidence. Not the same as Sinor's phony Plague—he would have been frantic if he truly had this to contend with.*

He signaled his question with his eyes. Why?

*Immune deficiency. Contact or airborne. Think about it.*

His eyes widened, and he nodded slowly. The nightmare that had haunted the human world since the twentieth century; the specter of an immune deficiency disease communicated by an airborne or simple-contact vector. No one wanted to think about it, yet in the minds of anyone connected to the medical professions, it was an ever-present threat.

"You two are a unique combination that I think has the best chance to track this thing to its source," Kenny said. "Medical Services will have more than one team on this—but you're the only BB team available. The Institute doesn't want any of their people to stumble on the Plague the hard way, so they subcontracted you to Medical for the duration. I'm delegating the planning of search-patterns to you. Got any ideas on how to start?"

"Right," Alex replied. "Then if that's what you want, let's do this the smart way, instead of the hard way. First off, what's the odds this could have come off a derelict—station or ship—out in hard vacuum?"

"Odds? Not likely. Hard vacuum kills all of the bugs involved. That *does* eliminate anything like a asteroid or EsKay situation, though, doesn't it?" Kenny looked fairly surprised, as well as pleased. "Let me get Lars in on this; he's been monitoring the poor devil."

It took a few moments for Lars to clear his boards enough to have attention to devote to a vocal circuit. During that time, Tia thought of a few questions she'd like to ask.

"Lars, has he *said* anything?" she asked, as soon as Lars joined the conference call. "Something that could give us clues?"

"Ravings, mostly—do you think you can get anything out of that?" Lars sounded fairly dubious. "It's not as if

he was an astrogator or anything. Mostly he's been yammering on about the weather, besides the usual; either pain and hallucinations, or about treasure and gold."

"The weather?" Tia responded immediately. "What about it?"

"Here, I'll give you what I've got—cleaned up so you can understand it, of course."

A new voice came over the circuit; harsh, with a guttural accent. "Treasure . . . gold . . . never saw s' much. Piles 'n' piles . . . no moon, *frag* it, how c'n a guy see anythin' . . . anythin' out there. No moon. Dark 's a worm-hole. Crazy weather. Nothin' but crazy weather . . . snow, rain, snow, sleet, mud—how ya s'posed t' dig this stuff up in this?"

"That's basically it," Lars said, cutting the recording off. "He talks about treasure, moonless, dark nights, and crazy weather."

"Why not assume he's complaining about where he was? Put that together with an atmosphere and . . . ?" Tia prompted. "What do you get?"

"Right. Possible eccentric orbit, probably extreme tilt, third-in Terra-type position, and no satellites," Lars sounded pleased. "I'll get Survey on it."

"What about the likely range of the ship that left him?" Tia asked. "Check with CenSec and Military; the docks at Yamahatchi had to have external specs and so forth on that ship. What kind of fuel did they take on, if any? Docks should have external pictures. Military ought to be able to guess at the range, based on that. That should give us a search area."

"Good," Kenny made notes. "I've got another range—how long it probably took for our victim to come down with the disease once he was infected. Combine that one with yours, and we should have a sphere around Yamahatchi."

"Kenny, he couldn't possibly have shown any symptoms while he was *in* space—they'd have pitched him out the airlock," Tia pointed out. "That means he probably went through incubation while they were in FTL and only showed symptoms once they hit port."

"Right. I'll have that calculated for you and get you the Survey records for that sphere, then it'll be up to you and the other teams," Kenny signed off, and Alex swiveled his chair to face Tia's column.

"There's an information lag for that area," Alex pointed out. "Yamahatchi is on the edge of known space. Survey is still working out there—except for really critical stuff, it's going to take weeks, months, even years for information to make it here. We need a search *net*, not just a couple of search teams."

"So, how about if we have Kenny call in not just Medical Services, but Decontamination?" she asked. "They don't have any BB teams either, but they do have the AI drones and the med teams assigned to them. They can run the net as well as we can. Slower, but that may not be so bad."

"I'll get on it," Alex replied instantly. "He can be mobilizing every free ship and team they've got while we compute the likely targets."

"And Intelligence!" she added, as Alex got back on

the horn with Kenny and his team. "Get Kenny to get in touch with Intel, and have their people inside that sphere be on the watch for more victims, rumors of plague or of plague ships, or ships that have mysteriously lost half their crews."

That would effectively increase their available eyes and ears a hundred-thousandfold.

"Or of ships that vanish and don't come into port," Alex said grimly. "Somewhere along the line that so-called tramp freighter is going to do just that; go into hyper and never come out again. Or come out and drift with no hand on the helm."

Tia wished she could still shiver; as it was, she felt as if her hull temperature had just dropped to absolute zero.

No computer could match the trained mind for being able to identify or discard a prospect with no data other than the basic Survey records. Alex and Tia each took cone-shaped segments of the calculated sphere and began running their own kind of analysis on the prospects the computer-search came up with.

Some were obvious: geologic instability that would uncover or bury the caches unpredictably. Weather that did not include snow, weather that did not include rain. Occupied planets with relatively thick settlements, or planets with no continents, only tiny island-chains.

Some were not so obvious: terrain with no real landmarks, or landmarks subject to change. Terrain with snow and rain, but with snow piling up twelve feet thick in the winter; too deep to dig in. The original trove must have been uncovered by accident—perhaps during the construction of a rudimentary base—or by someone just outside, kicking around dirt.

Places with freelance mining operations were on the list; agri-colonies weren't. Places marked by the Institute for investigation were, places with full Institute teams weren't. While Tia would not have put it past someone with problems to sell out to smugglers, she didn't think they'd care to cover up a contagious disease *this* hideous.

As soon as they finished mapping a cone, it went out to a team to cover. They had another plan in mind for themselves; covering free-trade ports, looking for another victim. They could cover the ports a lot faster than any of the AI or softperson-piloted ships; the only one faster would have been someone with a Singularity Drive. Since *those* were all fully occupied—and since, as yet, they had only one victim and not a full-scale Plague-in-progress—there was no chance of getting one reassigned to this duty. So AH One-Oh-Three-Three would be doing what it could—and trying to backtrack the "freighter" to its origin point.

They were running against the clock, and everyone on the project knew it. If this disease got loose in a large, space-going population, the chances of checking it before millions died were slender.

"Alex," Tia called for the third time, raising the volume of her voice a little more. This time he answered, even though he didn't turn his dark-circled eyes away from his work.

"What, m'love?" he said absently, his gaze glued to a topographical map on the screen before him, despite the fact that he could hardly keep his eyes open.

She overrode the screen controls, blanking the one in front of him. He blinked, and turned to stare at her with weary accusation.

"Why did you do that?" he asked. "I was right in the middle of studying the geography—"

"Alex," she said with exasperation, "you hadn't changed the screen in half an hour; you probably hadn't really looked at it at all in all that time. You haven't eaten anything in over six hours, you haven't slept in twenty, and you haven't *bailed* or changed your clothes in forty-eight!"

He rubbed his eyes and peered up at the blank screen. "I'm fine," he protested feebly.

"You're not," she countered. "You can hardly hold your head up. Look at your hand shake! Coffee is no substitute for sleep!"

He clenched his fist to stop the trembling of his hand. "I'm fine," he repeated stubbornly.

She made a rude noise, and flashed her screens at him, so that he winced. "There, see? You can't even control your reactions. If you don't eat, you'll get sick, if you don't sleep, you'll miss something vital, and if you don't bathe and change your clothes I'm turning you over to Decontam."

"All right, love, all right," he sighed, reaching over and patting her column. "Heat me up something; I'll be in the galley shortly."

"How shortly?" she asked sharply.

"As long as it takes for a shower and fresh clothes." He pried himself up out of his chair and stumbled for his room. A moment later, she heard the shower running—and when she surreptitiously checked, she discovered that as she had suspected, he was running it on cold.

*Trying to wake up, bmm? Not when I want you to relax.* She overrode the controls—not bringing it all the way up to blood-heat, but enough that he wasn't standing in something one degree above sleet. It must have worked; when he stumbled out into the galley, freshly clothed, he was yawning.

She fed him food laden with tryptophane; he was too tired to notice. And even though he punched for it, he got no coffee, only relaxing herbal teas.

He patted her auxiliary console—this time as if he were patting someone's hand to get her attention. He'd been doing that a lot, lately—that and touching her column like the arm of an old and dear friend. "Tia, love, don't you realize we're almost through with this? Two cones to go—three if you count the one I'm working on now—"

"Which I can finish," she said firmly. "I don't need to eat, and I only need three hours of DeepSleep in twenty-four. Yes, I knew. But you aren't going to get teams out there any faster by killing yourself—and if you work yourself until you're exhausted, you are going to miss what might be *the* important clue."

"But—" he protested, and was stopped by a yawn.

"No objections," she replied. "I can withhold the data, and I will. No more data for another eight hours. Con-

sider the boards locked, brawn. I'm overriding you, and if I have to, I'll get Medical to second me."

He was too tired to be angry, too tired even to object. In the past several days he had averaged about four hours in each sleep period, with nervous energy waking him long before he should have reawakened. But the strain was taking its toll. She had the feeling he was going to get that eight solid hours this time, whether or not he intended to.

"You aren't going to accomplish anything half-conscious," she reminded him. "You know what they say in the Academy; do it right, or don't do it."

"I give up." He threw his hands up in the air and shook his head. "You're too much for me, lover."

And with that, he wandered back into his cabin and fell onto his bunk, still fully clothed. He was asleep the moment he was prone.

She did something she had never done before: she continued to watch him through her eye in his cabin, brooding over him, trying to understand what had been happening over the past several days.

She had forgotten that she was encased in a column, not once, but for hours at a time. They had talked and acted like—like ordinary people, not like brain and brawn. Somehow, during that time, the unspoken, unconscious barriers between them had disappeared.

And he had called her "love" or "lover" no less than three times in the past ten minutes. He'd been calling her by that particular pet name quite a bit.

He had been patting her console or column quite a bit these past few days—as if he were touching someone's hand to gain attention, soothe, or emphasize a point.

She didn't think he realized that he was doing either of those things. It seemed very absent-minded, and very natural. So she wasn't certain what to make or think of it all. It could simply be healthy affection; some people used pet names very casually. Up until now, Alex hadn't, but perhaps until now he hadn't felt comfortable enough with her to do so. How long had they known each other anyway? Certainly not more than a few months—even though it felt like a lifetime.

*No, she told herself firmly. It doesn't mean a thing. He's just finally gotten to know me well enough to bring all his barriers down.*

But the sooner they completed their searches and got out into space again, the sooner things would go back to normal.

*Let's see if I can't do two of those three cones before he wakes up. . . .*

Predictably, the port that the mysterious tramp freighter had filed as its next port-of-call did not have any record of it showing up. Tia hadn't really expected it to; these tramps were subject to extreme changes of flight plan, and if it had been a smuggler, it *certainly* wouldn't log where it expected to go next.

She just hoped that it had failed to show up because the captain had lied—and not because they were drifting into in space somewhere. She let Alex do all the talking; he was developing a remarkable facility for playing

a part and very cleverly managed to tell the absolute truth while conveying an impression that was entirely different from the whole truth.

In this case, he left the station manager with the impression that he was an agent for a collection agency—one that meant to collect the entire ship, once he caught up with it.

Alex shut down the com to the station manager, and turned his chair to face her screen and the plots of available destinations.

"How do you do that?" she asked, finally. "Make them think something entirely different from the real truth?"

He laughed, while she pulled up the local map and projected it as a holographic image. "I've been in theater groups for as long as I can remember, once I got into school. My *other* hobby, the one I never took too seriously, even though they said I was pretty good. I just try to imagine myself as the person I want to be, and figure out what of the truth fits that image."

"Well," she said, as they studied the ship's possible destinations, "if I were a smuggler, where would I go?"

"Lermontov Station, Presley Station, Korgold Station, Tung Station," he said, ticking them off on his fingers.

"They might turn up elsewhere, but the rest all have Intel people on them; we'll know if they hit there."

"Provided whoever Intel has posted there is worth his paycheck. Why Presley Station?" she asked. "That's just an asteroid-mining company headquarters."

"High Family in residence," he replied, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers behind his head. "Money for valuable artifacts. Miners with money—and not all of them are rock-rats."

"I thought miners were . . . well, fairly crude," she replied.

He shook his head. "Miners are people, and there are all kinds out there. There are plenty of miners looking to make a stake—and some of them outfit their little tugs in ways that make a High Family yacht look plain. *They* have money for pretties, and they don't much care where the pretty came from. And one more thing; the Presley-Lee y Black consortium will buy ore hauls from anyone, including tramp prospectors, so we have a chance that someone may actually stumble on the trove itself. We can post a reward notice there, and it'll be seen."

"Along with a *danger* warning," she told him. "I only hope these people believe it. Lermontov first, then Tung, then Presley?"

"Your call, love," he replied comfortably, sending a carefully-worded notice to the station newsgrid. They didn't want to cause a panic, but they did want people to turn in any clue to the whereabouts of the freighter. And they didn't want anyone infected along the way. So the news notice said that the ship in question might have been contaminated with Anthrax Three, a serious, but not fatal, variant of old Terran anthrax.

He finished posting his notice, and turned back to her. "You're the pilot. I'm just along for the ride."

"It's the most efficient vector," she replied, logging her flight plan with Traffic Control. "Three days to Lermontov, one to Tung, a day and a half to Presley."

Despite Alex's disclaimer that he was only along for the ride, the two of them did not spend the three days to Lermontov idle. Instead, they sifted through all the reports they'd gotten so far from the other teams, looking for clues or hints that their mystery ship could have made port anywhere else. Then, when they hit Lermontov, Alex went hunting on-station.

This time his cover was as a shady artifact-dealer, looking for entire consignments on the cheap. There were plenty of people like him, traders with negotiable ethics, who would buy up a lot of inexpensive artifacts and forge papers for them, selling them on the open market to middle-class collectors who wanted to have something to impress their friends and bosses with their taste and education. Major pirates wouldn't deal with them—at least, not for the really valuable things. But crewmen, who might pick up a load of pottery or something else not worth the bigger men's time, would be only too happy to see him. In this case, it was fortunate that Tia's hull was that of an older model without a Singularity Drive; she looked completely nondescript and a little shabby, just the sort of thing such a man would lease for a trip to the Fringe.

Lermontov was a typical station for tramp freighters and ships of dubious registration. Not precisely a pirate station, since it *was* near a Singularity, it still had station-managers who looked the other way when certain kinds of ships made port, docks that accepted cash in advance, and didn't inquire too closely into papers, and a series of bars and restaurants where deals could be made with no fear of recording devices.

That was where Alex went—wearing one of his neon outfits. Tia was terrified that he would be recognized for what he was, but there was nothing she could do about it. He couldn't even wear a contact button; the antisurveillance equipment in every one of those dives would short it out as soon as he crossed the threshold. She could only monitor the station newsgrids, look for more clues about "their" ship, and hope his acting ability was as good as he thought it was.

Alex had learned the trick of drinking with someone when you wanted to stay sober a long time ago. All it took was a little sleight-of-hand. You let the quarry drain his drink, switch his with yours, and let him drain the second, then call for another round. After three rounds, he wouldn't even notice you weren't drinking, particularly not when you were buying the drinks.

*Thank the spirits of space for a Med Service credit account.*

He started out in the "Pink Comet," whose neon decorations more than outmatched his jumpsuit. He learned quickly enough there that the commodities *he* wanted weren't being offered—although the rebuff was friendly enough, coming from the bartender after he had already stood the whole house a round. In fact, the commodities being offered were more in the line of quasilegal services, rather than goods. The bartender didn't know who might have what he wanted—but he knew who would know, and sent Alex on to the "Rimrunners."



Several rounds later, he suffered through a comical interlude where he encountered someone who thought he was buying feelie-pom and sex-droids, and another with an old rock-rat who insisted that what he wanted was not artifacts, but primitive art. "There's no money in them arty-facts no more," the old boy insisted, banging the table with a gnarled fist. "Them accountants don't want arty-facts, the damn market's got *glutted* with 'em! I'm tellin' ya—primy-tive art is the *next* thing!"

It took Alex getting the old sot drunk to extract himself from the man, which might have been what the rock-rat intended in the first place. By then he discovered that the place he really wanted to be was the "Rockwall."

In the "Rockwall" he hit paydirt, all right—but not precisely what he had been looking for.

The bar had an odd sort of quiet ambience; a no-nonsense nonhuman bartender, an unobtrusive bouncer who outweighed Alex by half again his own weight, and a series of little enclosed table-nooks where the acoustics were such that no sound escaped the table-area. Lighting was subdued, the place was immaculately clean, the prices not outrageously inflated. Whatever deals went on here, they were discreet.

Alex made it known to the bartender what he was looking for, and took a seat at one of the tables. In short order, his credit account had paid for a gross of Betan funeral urns, twenty soapstone figurines of Rg'kedan snake-goddesses, three exquisite little crystal Kanathi skulls that were probably worth enough that the Institute and Medical would forgive him anything else he bought, and—of all bizarre things to see out here—a Hopi kachina figure of Owl Dancer from old Terra herself. The latter was probably stolen from another crewman; Alex made a promise to himself to find the owner and get it back to him—or her. It was not an artifact as such, but it might well represent a precious bit of tribal heritage to someone who was so far from home and tribe that the loss of this kachina could be a devastating blow.

His credit account had paid for these things—but those he did business with were paid in cash. Simply enough done, as he discovered at the first transaction. The seller ordered a "Rock 'n' Run"—the bartender came to the table with a cashbox. Alex signed a credit chit for the amount of sale plus ten percent to the bar; the bartender paid the seller. Everyone was happy.

He'd spoken with several more crewmen of various odd ships, prompting, without seeming to, replies concerning rumors of disease or of plague ships. He got old stories he'd heard before, the *Betan Dutchman*, the *Homecoming*, the *Alice Bee*. All ships and tales from previous decades; nothing new.

He stayed until closing, making the bartender stretch his "lips" in a cheerful "smile" at the size of the bills he was paying—and making the wait-beings argue over who got to serve him next because of the size of his tips. He had remembered what Jon Chernov had told him once about Intel people: *They have to account for every half-credit they spend, so they're as tightfisted as a corporate accountant at tax-time. If you're ever doing Intel work, be a big spender. They'll never suspect you. And*

*better a docked paycheck for overspending than a last look at the business end of a overspender.*

Just before closing was when the Quiet Man came in. As unobtrusive as they came, Alex didn't realize the man was in the bar until he caught a glimpse of him talking with the bartender. And he didn't realize that he was coming toward Alex's table until he was standing there.

"I understand you're buying things," the Quiet Man breathed. "I have some . . . things."

He opened his hand briefly to display a miniature vase or bottle, a lovely thing with a rainbow sheen and a style that seemed oddly familiar, although Alex couldn't place it. As if one had fused Art Nouveau with Salvador Dali, it had a skewed, but fascinating sinuosity.

"That's the sort of merchandise I'm interested in, all right," Alex said agreeably, as he racked his brain, trying to place where he had seen a piece like it before. "The trouble is, it looks a little expensive for my pocket."

The Quiet Man slid in opposite Alex at a nod. "Not as expensive as you think," the Quiet Man replied. "The local market's glutted with this stuff." The Quiet Man's exterior matched his speech; gray jumpsuit, pale skin, colorless eyes and hair, features that were utterly average.

"I have about a hundred little pieces like this, I haven't been able to unload them, and that's a fact."

"I appreciate your honesty," Alex told him, allowing his surprise to show through.

The Quiet Man shrugged. "You'd find it out sooner or later. The bosses only wanted the big stuff. Some of the other guys took jewelry; I thought they were crazy, since it was only titanium, and the pieces weren't comfortable to wear and a little flimsy. But some of the earlier crews must have brought back these perfume bottles, because I haven't been able to dump even one. I was hoping if you were buying for another sector, you'd be interested. I can give you a good deal on the lot."

"What kind of a good deal?" Alex asked.

The Quiet Man told him, and they began their bargaining. They ended it a good half hour after the bar was officially closed, but since Alex was willingly paying liquor prices for fruit juice—all that was legal after hours—the bartender was happy to have him there. The staff cleaned up around them, until he and the Quiet Man shook hands on the deal.

"These aren't exactly ancient artifacts," the Quiet Man had admitted under pressure from Alex. "They can be doctored to look like 'em with a little acid bath, though. They're, oh, maybe eight, nine hundred years old. Come from a place colonized by one of the real early human slowships; colony did all right for a while, then got religion and had themselves a religious war, wiped each other out until there wasn't enough to be self-sustaining. We figured the last of them died out maybe two hundred years ago. Religion. Go figure."

Alex eyed his new acquisition with some surprise. "This's human-made? Doesn't look it!"

The Quiet Man shrugged. "Beats me. Bosses said the colonists were some kind of artsy-craftsy back-to-nature types. Had this kind of offshoot of an Earth religion with sacramental halucinogenics thrown in to make it inter-

esting, until somebody decided *he* was the next great Prophet and half the colony didn't see it that way. I mean, who knows with that kind? Crazies."

"Well I can make something up that sounds pretty exotic," Alex said cheerfully. "My clients won't give a damn. So, what do you want to do about delivery?"

"You hire a lifter and a kid from SpaceCaps," the Quiet Man said instantly. "I'll do the same. They meet here, tomorrow, at twelve hundred. Your kid gives mine the credit slip, mine gives yours the box. Make the slip out to the bar, the usual."

Since that was exactly the kind of arrangement Alex had made for the gross of funeral urns, with only the time of delivery differing, he agreed, and he and the Quiet Man left the bar and went their separate ways.

When he returned to the ship, he took the stairs instead of the lift, still trying to remember *where* he had seen the style of the tiny vase.

"You look cheerful!" Tia said, relief at his safe return quite evident in her voice.

"I feel cheerful. I picked up some artifacts on the black market that I'm sure the Institute will be happy to have." He emptied his pockets of everything but the "perfume bottle" and laid out his "loot" where Tia could use her close-up cameras on the objects. "And this, I suspect, is stolen." He unwrapped the kachina. "See if you can find the owner, will you?"

"No problem," she replied absently. "I've been following your credit-chit all over the station; that's how I figured out how to keep track of you. Alex, the two end skulls are forgeries, but the middle one is real, and wins as much as everything you spent tonight."

"Glad to hear it." He chuckled. "I wasn't sure what I was going to say to the Institute and Medical if they found out I'd been overtyping and buying rounds for the house! All right, here's my final find, and I have a load of them coming over tomorrow. Do you remember what the devil this is?"

He placed the warped little vase carefully on the console. Tia made a strange little inarticulate gargle.

"Alex!" she exclaimed. "That's one of *Sinor's* artifacts!" He slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Of course! That's why I couldn't remember what book I'd seen it in! Spirits of space—Tia, I just made a deal with the crewman of the ship that's running these things in for a whole load of them! He said—and I quote—the bosses only wanted the bigger stuff. They're not really artifacts, they're from some failed human art-religious colony."

"I'm calling the contact number Sinor gave us," she said firmly. "Keep your explanations until I get someone on the line."

Tia had been ready to start sending her servos to pick lint from the carpet out of sheer nerves until she figured out that she could trace Alex's whereabouts by watching for his credit number in the station database. She followed him to three different bars that way, winding up in one called "Rockwall," where he settled down and began spending steadily. She called up the drink prices there, and soon knew when he had made an actual arti-

fact purchase by the simple expedient of which numbers didn't match some combination of the drink prices. A couple of times the buys were obvious; no amount of drinking was going to run up numbers like he'd just logged to his expense account.

She had worried a little when he didn't start back as soon as the bar closed—but drinks kept getting logged in, and she figured then, with a little shiver of anticipation, that he must have gotten onto a hot deal.

When he returned, humming a little under his breath, she *knew* he'd hit payday of some kind.

The artifacts he'd bought were enough to pacify the Institute—but when he brought out the little vase, she thought her circuits were going to fry.

The thing's identification was so obvious to *her* that she couldn't believe at first that he hadn't made the connection himself. But then she remembered how fallible softperson memory was. . . .

Well, it didn't matter. That was one of the things she was here for, after all. She grabbed a com-circuit and coded out the contact number Sinor had given her, hoping it was something without *too* much of a lag-time.

She could not be certain where her message went to—but she got an answer so quickly that she suspected it had to come from someone in the same real-space as Lermontov. No visual coming through to them, of course—which, if she still had been entertaining the notion that this was really an Institute directive they were following, would have severely shaken her convictions. But knowing it was probably the Drug Enforcement Arm, she played along with the polite fiction that the visual circuit on their end was malfunctioning, and let Alex repeat the details of the deal he had cut, as she offered only a close-up of the little vase.

"Go through with it," their contact said, when Alex was done. "You've done excellent work, and you'll be getting that bonus. Go ahead and receive the consignment; we'll take care of the rest and clear out the debits on that account for you. And don't worry; they'll never know you weren't an ordinary buyer."

There was no mention of Plague or any suggestions that they should take precautions against contamination. Alex gave her a significant look.

"Very well, sir," he only said, with careful formality. "I hope we've accomplished something here for you."

"You have," the unknown said, and then signed off.

Alex picked up the little vase and turned it around and around in his hands as he sat down in his chair and put his feet up on the console. Tia made the arrangements for the two messengers to come to the ship for the credit chits and then to the bar for the pickups—fortunately, not at the same time. That didn't take more than a moment or two, and she turned her attention back to Alex as soon as she was done.

"Was that stupid, dumb luck, coincidence, or were we set up?" she asked suspiciously. "And where *was* that agent? It sounded like he was in our back pocket!"

"I'm going to make some guesses," Alex said, carefully. "The first guess is that we *did* run into some plain good luck. The Quiet Man had tried all the *approved*

outlets for his trinkets—outlets that the Arm doesn't know about—and found them glutted. He was desperate enough to try someone like me. I suspect his ship pulls out tomorrow or the next day."

"Fine—but why go ahead and sell to you if he didn't know you?" Tia asked.

"Because I was in the right bar, making all the right moves, and I didn't act like the Arm or Intel." Alex rubbed his thumb against the sides of the vase. "I was willing to go through the barkeep to pay, which I don't think Intel would do. I had the right 'feel,' and I suspect he was watching to see if any of his buddies got picked up after they sold to me. And lastly, once again, we were lucky. Because *he* doesn't know what his bosses are using the phony artifacts for. He thought the worst that could happen is that wrist-slap and fine, for importing art objects without paying customs duty on them."

"Maybe *his* bosses aren't using the artifacts for smuggling," she pointed out, thinking out all the possibilities. "Maybe they are just passing them on to a second party."

"In this station, that's very possible." Alex put the vase down carefully. "At any rate, I think the Arm suspected this cluster of stations all along, and they've got a ship out here somewhere—which is why we got an answer so quickly. I *thought* that was a ship-contact number when I saw it, but I didn't say anything."

"Hmm." Tia ran through all the things *she* would have done next, and came up with a possible answer. "So now they just find the messenger that goes to 'Rockwall' at noon from a ship that isn't ours, and tags the ship for watching? Or is that too simple?"

Alex yawned and stretched. "Probably," he said, plainly bored with the whole game now. "He probably won't send the messenger from his ship. They'll do their spy work somehow; we just gave them what they didn't have in the first place, a contact point. It's out of our hands, which is just as well, since I'd rather not get involved in a smuggler versus Intel shoot-out. I'm *tired*."

"Then you should get some rest," she said immediately. "And get that jumpsuit out of my cabin before it burns out my optics."

He laughed—but he also headed straight for his bed.

Tia didn't even bother to wake her brawn as she approached Presley Station and hailed their traffic control. She expected the usual automated AI most mining stations had; she got a human. Although it was audio only, there was no doubt that this was a real human being and not an AI-augmented recording.

Because, from the strain in the voice, it was a very nervous and unhappy human.

"AH One-Oh-Three-Three, be advised we are under a Code Five quarantine," the com officer said, with the kind of hesitation that made her think he wasn't on a microphone very often. "We can let you dock, and we can refuse you with servos, but we can't permit you to open your airlock. And we'd like you to move on to some other station if you have the reserves."

*He can't deny us docking under a Code Five, but he's frightened. And he really wants us to go away.*

Tia made a quick command decision. "Presley Station, be advised that we are on assignment from CenCom Medical. References coming now." She sent over her credentials in a databurst. "We're coming in, and we'd appreciate Presley Station's cooperation. We'd like to be connected to your Chief Medical Officer while we maneuver for docking, please."

"Uh—!" There was a brief muttering, as if he was speaking to someone else; then he came back on the mike. "We can do that. Stand by for docking instructions."

At that point the human left the com, and the AI took over; she woke up Alex and briefed him, then gave him a chance to get dressed and gulp some coffee while she dealt with the no-longer-routine business of docking. As she followed the AI's fairly simple instructions, she wondered just what exactly was going on at Presley Station.

Was this the start of the Plague, or a false alarm?

Or—was this just one outbreak among many?

She waited impatiently for the com officer to return online, while Alex gulped down three cups of coffee and shook himself out of the fog of interrupted sleep. It took forever, or at least it seemed that way.

Finally the com came alive again. "AH One-Oh-Three-Three, we have the Chief Medical Officer online for you now." It was a different voice; one with more authority. Before Tia could respond, both voice and visual channels came alive, and she and Alex found themselves looking into the face of a seriously frightened man, a man wearing medical whites and the insignia of a private physician. "Hello?" the man said tentatively. "You—you're from MedServices? You don't look like a doctor."

"I'm not a doctor," Alex said promptly. "I've been authorized by CenCom MedServices to investigate a possible outbreak of a new infectious disease that involves immune deficiency syndrome. We had reason to believe that there's an infectious site somewhere in this sphere, and we've been trying to track the path of the last known victim."

There was no doubt about it; the doctor paled. "Let me show you our patient," he whispered, and reached for something below the screen. A second signal came in, which Tia routed to her side screen.

The patient displayed suppurating boils virtually identical with Kenny's victim; the only difference was that this man was not nearly so far gone as the first one.

"Well, he matches the symptoms of the victim we've been tracking," Alex said calmly, while Tia made frantic adjustments to her blood-chemistry levels to get her heart calmed down. "I trust you have him in full isolation and quarantine."

"Him and his ship," the doctor replied, visibly shaking. "We haven't had any new cases, but *decom* it, we don't know what this is or what the vector is or—"

"I've got a contact number coming over to you right now," Alex interrupted, typing quickly. "As soon as you get off the line with me, get onto this line; it's a double-bounce link up to MedServices and a Doctor Kennet Uhua-Sung. He's the man in charge of this; he has the first case in his custody, and he'll know whatever there is to know. What we'd like is this; we're the team in

charge of tracking this thing to its source. Do you know anything about where this patient came from, what he was doing—"

"Not much," the doctor said, already looking relieved at the idea that someone at CenCom was "in charge" of this outbreak. Tia didn't have the heart to let him know how little Kenny knew; she only hoped that since they'd left, he'd come up with something more in the way of a treatment. "He's a tramp prospector; he came in here with a load we sealed off, and sick as a dog—crawled into port under his own power but he collapsed on the dock as soon as he was out of the ship, yelling for a medic. We didn't know he was sick when we let him dock, of course—"

The man was babbling, or he wouldn't have let that slip. Interstellar law decreed that victims of disease be given safe harborage within quarantine, but Tia had no doubt that if Traffic Control *hadn't* been an AI, the prospector would have never gotten a berth. At best, they would have denied him docking privileges; at worst, they'd have sent a fighter out to blast him into noninfectious atoms. She made a mental note to send that information to the Kenny with their initial report.

"—when he collapsed and one of the dockworkers saw the sores, he hit the alarm and we sealed the dock off, sent in a crew in decontam suits to get him and put him into isolation. I sent off a Priority One to our PTA but it takes so long to get an answer from them—"

"Did he say where he thought he caught this?" Alex said, interrupting him again.

The doctor shook his head. "He just said he was out looking for a good stake when he stumbled across something that looked like an interstellar rummage sale, and he figures that was where he got hit. What he meant my 'interstellar rummage sale' he won't say. Just that it was a lot of 'stuff' he didn't recognize."

Well, that matched their guess as to the last victim.

"Can we talk to him?" Tia asked.

The doctor shrugged. "You can try. I'll give you audio-visual access to the room. He's conscious and coherent, but whether or not he'll be willing to tell you anything, I can't say. He sure won't tell us much."

It was fairly obvious that he was itching to get to a cosmet and get in contact with MedServices, thus, symbolically at least, pushing the problem up the line. If his bosses cared about where the miner had picked up the infection, they hadn't told *him* about it.

Not too surprising. He was a Company doctor. He was supposed to be treating execs for indigestion, while his underlings patched up miners after bar fights, and set broken bones after industrial accidents. The worst he was ever supposed to see was an epidemic of whatever new influenza was going around. He was *not* supposed to have to be dealing with a Plague; at least, not by his way of thinking. Traffic control was supposed to be keeping Plague ships from ever coming near the station.

"Thanks for your cooperation, doctor," Alex said genially. "Get that link set up for us, if you would, and we'll leave you to your work."

The doctor signed off—still without identifying himself,

not that Tia was worried. Her recordings were enough for any legal purposes, and at this point, now that he had passed authority on to them, he was a nonentity. They didn't need to talk to him anymore. What they needed was currently incarcerated in an isolation room on that station—and they were going to have to figure out how to get him to talk to them.

"Okay, Alex," she said when the screen was safely blank. "You're a lot closer to being an expert on this than I am. How do we get a rock-rat to tell us what we want to know?"

"Hank, my name's Alex," the brawn said, watching the screen and all the patient-status readouts alongside. "I'm a brawn from CS, on loan to MedServices; you'll hear another voice in a moment, and that's my brainship, Tia."

"Hello Hank," she said, very glad that she was safely encased in her column with no reactions for Hank to read. Alex was doing a good job of acting; one she knew she would never be able to match. Just looking at Hank made her feel . . . twitchy, shivery, and quite uncomfortable; sensations she hadn't known she could still have. "I don't know if anyone bothered to tell you, but we were sent out here because there's someone else with what you've got; it's very contagious, and we're trying to keep it from turning into a Plague. Will you help us?"

"*Give him the straight story*," Alex had said; Kenny had agreed to that when they got hold of him, right after the Company doctor had called him. "*There's no point in trying to trick him. If he knows how bad off he is, he just might be willing to cooperate.*"

The sores only grew worse when you bandaged them, so Hank was lying in a gel-bed—a big pan full of goo, really, with a waterbed mattress beneath the goo. Right now only the opaque green gel covering him was keeping him from outraging modesty. The gel was a burn-treatment, and something Kenny had come up with for the other man. *He* was still alive, but no better than when they had left. They still had no idea who or what he was, besides horribly unlucky.

Hank peered up at the screen in the corner of his room, through a face grotesquely swollen and broken out. "These Company goons won't give me any kind of a straight story," he said hoarsely. "All they do is try 'n' brush me off. How bad off am I?"

"There's no cure," Alex said, flatly. "There's one other known victim. The other man is worse than you, and they haven't found anything to reverse his condition. That's the truth."

Hank cursed helplessly for about four or five minutes straight before he ran out of breath and words. Then he lay back in the gel-bed for another couple of minutes with his eyes closed.

Tia decided to break the silence. "I don't know how you feel about the rest of the universe, Hank, but—we need to know where you came down with this. If this got loose in any kind of population—"

"S all right, lady," he interrupted, eyes still closed. "You're preachin' to the choir. Ain't no percentage in keeping my mouth shut now." He sighed, a sound that

was perilously close to a sob. "I run across this place by accident, and I ain't sure how I'd find it again—but you guys might be able to. I give you what data I got. I'd surely hate t' see a kid in the shape I'm in right now."

"Thanks, Hank," Alex said, with quiet gratitude. "I wish there was something we could do for you. Can you think of anything you'd like?"

Hank shook his head just a little. "Tell you what; I got some serious hurt, here, an' what they're given me ain't doin' much, 'cause they're 'fraid I'm gonna get hooked. You make these bozos give me all the pain meds I ask for—if I ever get cured up, I'll dry out *then*. You think you can do that for me?"

"I'll authorize it," Tia said firmly. At Alex's raised eyebrow, she printed: *Kenny's authorizations include patient treatments. We've got that power, and it seems cruel not to give him that much relief.*

Alex nodded. "Okay Hank, my partner says she can boss the docs here. So, fire away; we're recording. Unless you want something now."

"Naw. I wanta stay on this planet long enough t' give you what little info I got," Hank coughed. "First off, my boat's an old wreck; falls outa hyper all the time, and the recorder don't always work when she takes a dive. Basically, what happened was she fell out, and there was a Terra-type planet not too far from where she dropped. My holds was pretty empty, so I figured I'd see if there was anything around. Registered somethin' that looked like wrecked buildings in one spot, went down t' take a look-see."

"That was where you caught this thing?" Alex asked.

"I'm gettin' to that. Weren't no signs of life, okay? But there was some buildings there, old and kinda busted up, round, like them flyin' saucers people used to see—I figured maybe I'd hit some place where the archies hadn't got to, mebbe I could pick up somethin' I could peddle. I went ahead an' landed, okay? Only I found somethin' that looked like somebody else had been there first. Looked like—I dunno, like somebody'd been collectin' and hoardin' for a long, long time, buryin' the stuff in caves by the buildings, stashin' it in the buildings that wasn't busted up. Some of it was dug up already, some of it somebody'd just started t' dig up."

"How do you mean?" Alex asked.

"Like somebody's kid's idea of a treasure place. Caves, lots of 'em, some of 'em dug up, all of 'em prob'ly had stuff in 'em." Hank's voice started to slur with fatigue, but he seemed willing to continue, so Tia let him.

"Anyway, I got down there, grabbed some of the good stuff, took lots of holos so if I ever figured out where it was, I could stake a legal claim on it." He sighed. "I was keepin' my mouth shut, partly 'cause I don't trust these Company goons, partly 'cause I figured on goin' back as soon as I got cured." He coughed, unhappily. "Well, it don't much look like I'm gonna get cured up any time soon, does it?"

"I can't promise anything but the pain meds, Hank," Tia said softly.

"Yeah." He licked cracked and swollen lips with a pale tongue. "Look, you get into my ship. See if the damn

recorder was workin' at all. Get them holos, see if you can figure out where the devil I was from 'em. You guys are CS, ev'body knows you can trust CS—if there's anything I can get outa this, see what you can do, okay?" The last was more of a pathetic plea than anything else.

"Hank, I can guarantee you this much—since you've cooperated, there's some kind of reward system with MedService for people who cooperate in closing down Plagues," Alex said, after a few moments of checking with regs. "It includes all medical covered—including prosthetics and restorations—and full value of personal possessions confiscated or destroyed. That should include your ship and cargo. We'll itemize the *real* value of your cargo if we can."

Hank just sighed, but it sounded relieved. "Good," he replied, his voice fading with exhaustion. "Knew I could ... trust CS. Lissen, can I get some 'f that pain med now?"

Tia logged the authorization and activated the servonurse. "Coming up, Hank," she said. The man turned his head slightly as he heard the whine of the motor, and his eyes followed the hypospray until it touched his arm. "From now on, you just voice-activate the servo—tell it 'DM-Tia' and it will know what to give you." There was a hiss; then for one moment, what was left of his swollen lips curved in something like a smile. Tia closed down the link after locking in the "on-demand" authorization. It would take someone from CenCom MedServices to override it now.

Meanwhile, Alex had been arguing with Dock Services, and finally had to pull rank on them to get access to the controls for the dock servos and remotes. Once that was established, however, it was a matter of moments for Tia to tie herself in and pick out a servo with a camera still inside the quarantined area to send into the ship.

She selected the most versatile she could find; one with a crawler base, several waldos of various size and strength, and a reasonable optical pickup. "We aren't going to tell them that hard vacuum kills the bugs yet, are we?" she asked, as she activated the servo and sent it crawling toward the abandoned dock.

"Are you kidding?" Alex snorted. "Given the pass-the-credit attitude around here, I may never tell them. Let Kenny do it if he wants, but I'd be willing to bet that the moment we tell them, they'll seal off the section and blow it, then go in and help themselves to whatever's on Hank's ship before we get a chance to make a record of it."

"I won't take that bet," she replied, steering the crawler up the ramp and into the still-gaping airlock.

Hank hadn't exaggerated when he'd said his ship was a wreck; it had more patches and make-dos on it than she had dreamed possible on a ship still in space and operating. Half the wall plates were gone on the inside of the lock; the floor plates were of three different colors. And when she brought the crawler into the control cabin, it was obvious that the patchworking probably extended to the entire ship.

Exposed wiring was everywhere; the original control panels had long ago been replaced by panels salvaged from at least a dozen other places. Small wonder the ship had a tendency to fall out of hyper; she was surprised it

ever managed to stay *in* hyper, with all the false signals that should be coming off those boards.

"You think the recorder caught where he went?" Alex asked doubtfully, peering at the view in the screen. The lighting was in just as poor shape as everything else, but Tia had some pretty sophisticated enhancement abilities, and the picture wasn't too bad. The ship's "black box" recorder, which *should* have registered everything this poor old wreck had done, was in no better shape than the rest of the ship.

"Either it did, or it didn't," she said philosophically. "We'll have a pattern of where he was supposed to be going, though, and where he thought he was heading when he left our little Plague-spot. We should be able to deduce the general area from that."

"Ah, and since we know the planetary type, if Survey ever found it, we'll know where it is." Alex nodded as his hands raced across the keyboards, helping Tia with the complex servo. "Look, there's the com, I think. Get the servo a little closer, and I'll punch up a link to us."

"Right." She maneuvered the crawler in between two seats with stuffing oozing out of cracks in the upholstery, and got the servo close enough to the panel than Alex could reach it with one of the waldos. While he punched in their access com-code, she activated the black box, plugged the servo into it, and put it on com uplink mode with another waldo. She would have shaken her head, if she could have. Not only was all of this incredibly jury-rigged, it actually looked as if many of the operations that should have been automatic had deliberately been made manual.

"I can't believe this stuff," she said, finally. "It must have taken both hands and feet to fly this wreck!"

"It probably did," Alex observed. "A lot of the old boys are like that. They don't trust AIs, and they'll tell you long stories about how it's because someone who was a friend of a friend had trouble with one and it nearly killed him or wrecked his ship. The longer they stay out here, the odder they get that way."

"And CenCom worries about *us* going loony," she replied, making a snorting sound. "Seems to me there's a lot more to worry about with one of these old rock-rats."

"Except that there's never been a case of one of them going round the bend in a way that endangered more than a couple of people," Alex replied. Just about then, one of Tia's incoming lines activated. "There. Have I got you live, lover?"

"Yes, I'm downlinking now." The black box burped its contents at her in a way that made her suspect more than one gap in its memory-train. *Oh, well. Maybe we'll get lucky.* "Should we go check out the holds now?"

"Not the holds, the cabin," Alex corrected. "The holds will probably be half full of primary-processed metals, or salvage junk. He'll have put his loot from the site in the cabins, if it was anything good."

"Good enough." She backed the servo out carefully, hoping to avoid tangling it in anything. Somehow she actually succeeded; she wasn't quite sure how. She had no real "feeling" from this servo; no sense of where its limbs were, no feedback from the crawler treads. It made

her appreciate her shipbody all that much more. With the kinesthetic input from her skin sensors and the internals, she knew where everything was at all times, exactly as if she had grown this body herself.

There were two cabins off the main one; the first was clearly Hank's sleeping quarters, and Tia was amazed at how neat and clean they were. Somehow she had expected a rat's nest. But she recalled the pictures of the control room as she turned the servo to the other door, and realized that the control room had been just as neat and clean—

It was only the myriad of jury-rigs and quick-fix repairs that had given the impression of a mess. There wasn't actually any garbage in there—the floor and walls were squeaky-clean. Hank ran as clean a ship as he could, given his circumstances.

The second door was locked; Alex didn't even bother with any kind of finesse. Hank's ship would be destroyed at this point, no matter what they did or didn't do. One of the waldos was a small welding torch; Alex used it to burn out the lock.

The door swung open on its own, when the lock was no longer holding it. Tia suddenly knew how Lord Carnarvon felt when he peeked through the hole bored into the burial chamber of Tutankhamen.

"Wonderful things!" she breathed, quoting him half-unconsciously.

Hank must have worked like a madman to get everything into that cabin. This *was* treasure, in every sense of the word. There was nothing in that cabin that did not gleam with precious metal or the sleekness of consummate artistry. Or both. The largest piece was a statue about a meter tall, of some kind of stylized winged creature. The smallest was probably one of the rings in the heaps of jewelry piled into the carved stone boxes on the floor—which were themselves works of high art. If Hank could claim even a fraction of this legally, he could buy a new ship and still be a wealthy man.

If he lived to enjoy his wealth, that is.

He had stowed his loot very carefully, Tia saw, with the same kind of neat, methodical care that showed in his own cabin. Every box of jewelry was carefully strapped to the floor; every vase was netted in place. Every statue was lying on the bunk and held down by restraints. The cabin had been crammed as full as possible while still permitting the door to open, but every single piece had been neatly stowed and then secured, so that no matter what the ship did, none of it would break loose. And so that none of it would damage anything else.

"Have we got enough pictures?" Alex asked faintly. "I'm being overcome by gold fever. I'd like to look for those holos before my avarice gets the better of my common sense, and I go running down there to dive into that stuff myself."

"Right!" Tia said hastily, and backed the servo out again. The door swung shut after it, and Alex heaved a very real sigh of relief.

"Sorry, love," he said apologetically. "I never thought I'd ever react like that."

"You've never been confronted with several million



credits' worth of gold alone," she replied soothingly. "I don't even want to think what the real value of all of that is. Do you think he'd keep the holos in his cabin?"

"There's no place to stash them out in the control room," Alex pointed out.

Once again, Hank's neat and methodical nature saved the day for them, and Tia knew why he hadn't bothered to tell them where he'd put his records. Once they entered his cabin, there next to a small terminal was a drawer marked "Records," and in the drawer were the hardcopy claim papers he'd intended to file and the holos he'd taken in a section marked "Possible Claims."

"Luck's on our side today," Alex marveled. Tia agreed. It would have been *far* more likely that they'd have gotten some victim who'd refuse to divulge anything, or one who'd been half-crazed—or one who simply hadn't kept any kind of a record at all.

Luck was further on their side; he'd made datahedron copies of everything, including the holos, and *those* could be uplinked to AH One-Oh-Three-Three. There would be no need to bring anything out of the quarantined dock area.

It took them several hours to find a way to bring up the reader in the control cabin, then link the reader into the com system, but once they got a good link established, it was a matter of nanoseconds and the precious recordings were theirs.

She guided the servo toward the lock, and swiveled the optic back for a last look—and realized that *she* still had control over a number of the ship's functions via the servo.

"Alex," she said slowly, "it would be a terrible thing if the airlock closed and locked, wouldn't it? That would mean even if station ops blew the section to decontaminate it, they wouldn't be able to get into the ship—or even get it undocked. They'd never know exactly what was on board."

Alex blinked in bewilderment for a moment—then slowly grinned. "That *would* be terrible, wouldn't it?" he agreed. "Well, goodness, Tia, I imagine they'd probably dither around about it until somebody from CenCom showed up—somebody with authority to confiscate it and hold it for decontamination and evaluation."

"Of course," she continued smoothly, sending a databurst to the servo, programming it to get the airlock to shut and lock up. "And you know, these old ships are so unreliable—what if something happened to the ship's systems that made it vent to vacuum? Why then, even if the station managers decided to try to short-circuit the lock, they wouldn't get it open against a hard vacuum. They'd have to bring in vacuum-welders and cut the locks open—and that would damage their own dock area. That would just be such an inconvenience."

"It certainly would," Alex said, stifling a laugh.

She sent further instructions to the ship, and noted with glee the ship proceeding to vent out the spaceward side. The servo noted hard vacuum on one of its sensors in a fairly reasonable length of time.

Satisfied that no one was going to be able to break into Hank's ship and pilfer his treasure, she sent a last set

of instructions to the servo, shutting it down until she sent it an activation key. No one was going to get into that ship without her cooperation.

Hank would get a finder's fee, if nothing else, based on the value of the artifacts he had found. But now it would be based on the *true* value of what he had found, and not just what was left after the owners of Presley Station took their pick of the loot. Assuming they even left anything at all.

"Well," she said, when she had finished. "We'd better get to work. Are *you* any good at deciphering black-box recordings?"

"Tolerably," Alex replied. "Tell you what; you analyze the holos while I diddle the black-box data, then we'll switch."

"Provided you don't get gold fever again," she warned him, opening the data on his screens.

The holos showed exactly what Hank had reported; a series of caves—caves that looked to have been artificially cut into the bluffs beside the ruined buildings. The nearest were completely dug up, and plainly emptied, but beyond them there was another series of caves that were open to the air and still held treasures. But this wasn't like anything Tia had ever seen before. Each one of those caves, rather than being some kind of grave or other archeological entity, was clearly nothing more than a cache—and each one held precious objects from an entirely different culture than the one next to it. The two nearest the camera in the first holo held sacred objects from two cultures that were light-years apart—and from ages when neither civilization had attained even interplanetary flight, much less starflight.

Furthermore, the more Tia studied the holos, the more she came to the conclusion that the original caches were old; never mind who was digging them up now. The kind of weathering of the surface and layering of detritus she saw in the holos took hundreds, perhaps thousands of years to build up. And the buildings in one of the other holos were *very* old.

Nor did she recognize who could've constructed them.

So who could have been responsible for collecting all these treasures in the first place? Why had they buried them? Where did they get it all—and above all, why didn't they come back after it?

There was some evidence around the caves that the current looters had attempted to rebury their finds. But had they done so in an attempt to hide it again—or had they done it to try to kill the disease? How many of the looters were exposed? From the number of caves that had been broken into, it looked as if there had been quite a few people at work there. . . .

Tia wished she could sit back and chew a nail or something. All she had now were questions and no answers. And the lives of other people might hang in the balance.

There was only one way to answer all those questions. They were going to have to find Hank's mystery planet, and find out for themselves.

Tia didn't entirely trust the integrity of the Presley Station comcenter. She *certainly* expected that whatever she

sent out would be monitored by the owners and their underlings. Unfortunately, there had been no provision for the need for secrecy in this mission; she had no codes and no scramblers. There had been no real reason to think that they would ever need such secrecy, so she was forced to send in the clear. Just to be on the safe side, she uplinked on her own, and double-sent everything, but she knew that whatever she sent off that way would be subject to delays as it bounced from remote hyperwave relay-station to relay-station, taking the long way "home."

As she had expected, the owners of the station were quick to move on the information that Hank's ship contained treasure, despite the fact that no one should have read her messages back to Kenny and the rest. She was just grateful that the owners' first thought was to grab what they could from the nearby trove, and *not* to try to figure out where Hank came from—or attempt to force him to tell them.

The first intimation that the communications had been leaked was when the Station Ops tried to claim the ship and all its contents for themselves, filing confiscation papers in the Central Systems Courts. When they discovered that Tia had already tied the ship and its contents up legally on Hank's behalf, they moved on the principle that "possession is nine-tenths of the law, and the fellow arguing the other tenth has to prove it with a lawyer."

They sent crews into the docks, to try to get into the ship to strip it of as much as they could. Tia's cleverness thwarted them, as they worked their way—slowly—through every step she'd expected.

She figured that by the time they were in a position to actually threaten Hank's possessions, the CS authorities would be on the scene in person. Meanwhile, she and Alex had some figuring to do—*where* was Hank's cache-world? Same problem as before, except that this time the possible search area was smaller, and cone-shaped rather than spherical.

Unfortunately, there were some other people who wanted to get their hands on that same information.

And unknown to either of them, those people had decided that Alex and Tia were already privy to it.

Tia kept a careful eye on the activity around her slip just on general principles even when she wasn't feeling nervous—but given their current circumstances, and the fact that they were the *only* Central Systems ship out here at the moment, she couldn't help but feel a bit, well, paranoid. At the moment, only three people knew for certain that she was a brainship; Hank, the traffic-control officer who brought them in, and that doctor. She was pretty sure that the doctor hadn't mentioned it to his superiors; she knew Hank hadn't told anyone, and as jittery as the other man had been, he'd probably forgotten it.

No one addressed *her* when they called, at any rate, and she took pains to make callers think that she was an AI. So far, they seemed to be falling in with the deception. This wasn't a bad state of affairs; no one expected an AI to recognize dangers the way a real sentient could. She could tap into the optical scanners in

the dock area around the ship and no one would have any notion that she was keeping watch. She made sure to schedule her three or four hours of DeepSleep while Alex was awake, normally taking them during his "morning," while he was still rather grumpy and uncommunicative and she'd rather not talk to him anyway. And she scanned the recordings she made while she was under, just to be sure she didn't miss anything.

That was why, a few days after their interview with Hank, she noticed the man in the dock-crew uniform-coverall who seemed to be working double shifts. Except that no one else was working double shifts . . . and what was more, there was currently a Company prohibition against overtime as a cost-cutting measure.

Something wasn't right, and he never left the immediate area of her slip. What was he doing there? It wasn't as if she was either a freighter with goods to load or unload, or a passenger liner. She didn't need servicing either. He never got close enough that she could see exactly what he was up to—but it seemed to her that he was doing an awful lot of make-work. . . .

She kept a close eye on him as he wandered around the dock area—purposefully, but accomplishing nothing that she could see. Gradually, though, he worked his way in closer and closer to *her* slip, and little mental alarms began going off as she watched him and the way he kept glancing at her lock out of the corner of his eye.

Around sixteen hundred she watched him removing control-panel plates and cleaning in behind them, work too delicate to trust to a servo.

Except that he'd just cleaned that area two hours ago.

That was senseless; regs said the panels only had to be cleaned once every two *weeks*, not every two hours.

Furthermore, there was something not quite right with his uniform. It wasn't exactly the same color of gray as everyone else's; it looked crisply new, and the patches were just a little too bright. There were plenty of dockworkers' uniforms in Presley storage; there was no reason for someone to have had a new one made up unless he was an odd size. And this man was as average as anyone could be. He was so *very* unremarkable that she noticed his uniform long before she noticed him.

That was bad enough—but just as seventeen hundred passed and everyone else in the dock crew went on supper break, another man in that too-new uniform showed up, while the first man kept on puttering about.

"Alex?" she said unhappily. "There's something going on out there I don't like."

He looked up from his perusal of Hank's holos; he had prints made from them spread out all over the floor, and was sitting on his heels beside them. "What's up?"

She filled him in quickly, as a third and a fourth person in that same uniform ambled into the dock.

There were now four crewmen in the docks during break. All four of them in a dock area where there were no ships loading or unloading and no new ships expected to dock in the next twenty-four hours.

"I don't like this either," he said, much to her relief, standing up and heading for the main console. "I want you to get the station manager online and see what—"

Abruptly, as if someone had given the four men a signal, they dropped everything they were pretending to do and headed for her docking slip.

Tia made a split-second decision, for within a few seconds they were going to be in her airlock.

She slammed her airlock shut, but one of the men now running for her lock had some kind of black box in his hands; she couldn't trust that he might not be able to override her own lock controls. "Alex!" she cried as she frantically hot-keyed her engines from cold start. "They're going to board!"

As Alex flung himself at his acceleration couch, she sent off a databurst to the station-manager and hit the emergency override on her side of the dock.

The dock-side airlock doors slammed shut, literally in the faces of the four men approaching. Another databurst to the docking-slip controls gave her an emergency uncouple—there weren't too many pilots who knew about that kind of override, still in place from the bad old days when captains had to worry about pirates and station-raiders. She gave her insystem attitude thrusters a kick and shoved free of the dock altogether, frantically switching to external optics and looking for a clear path out to deep space.

As her adrenaline level kicked up, her reactions went into overdrive, and what had been realtime became slow motion. Alex sailed ungracefully through the air, lurching for his chair; to her, the high-speed chatter of comlinks between AIs slowed to a drawl. Calculations were going on in her subsystems that she was only minimally aware of; a kind of background murmur as she switched from camera to camera, looking for the trouble she knew must be out there.

"The *cbair*, Alex," she got out—just in time to spot a bee-craft, the kind made for outside construction work on the station, heading straight for her. Behind it were two men in self-propelled welder suits. Someone had stolen or requisitioned station equipment, and they were going to get inside her no matter what the consequences were.

Accidents in space were so easy to arrange. . . .

Alex wasn't strapped down yet. She couldn't wait.

She spun around as Alex leapt for his couch, throwing him off balance, and blasted herself out of station-space with a fine disregard for right-of-way and inertia as he grabbed and caught the arm of the chair.

Alex slammed face-first into the couch, yelped in pain at the impact, and clung with both hands.

There was another small craft heading for her with the purposeful acceleration of someone who intended to ram. She poured on the speed, all alarms and SOS signals blaring, while Alex squirmed around and fastened himself in, moaning. His nose dripped blood down the side of his face, and his lip poured scarlet where he'd bitten or cut it.

She dove under the bow of a tug, delaying her pursuer.

Who was in on this? Was this something the High Families were behind?

Surely not—

Please, not—

She continued to accelerate, throwing off distress sig-

nals even onto the relays, dumping real-time replays into message bursts every few seconds. Another tug loomed up in front of her; she sideslipped at the last moment, skimming by the AI-driven ship so close that it shot attitude thrusters out in all directions, the AI driven into confusion by her wild flying.

The ship behind was still coming on; no longer gaining, but not losing any ground either.

But with all the fuss that Tia was putting up, even Presley Station couldn't ignore the fact that someone was trying to 'jack her. Especially not with Central Systems investigators due any day, and with the way she was dumping her records onto the relays. If "they" were allied with the Station, "they" wouldn't be able to catch everything and wipe it. If AH One-Oh-Three-Three disappeared, she was making it very hard for the claim of "accident" to hold any water—

*I hope.*

As Tia continued to head for deep space, a patrol craft finally put in an appearance, cutting in between her and her pursuer, who belatedly turned to make a run for it.

Tia slowed, and stopped, and held her position, as the adrenaline in her blood slackened off.

*I remember panting. I remember shivering. I'd do both right now, if I could.* As it was, errant impulses danced along her sensors, ghost-feelings of the *might-have-been* of weapons fire, tractor beams . . .

*Slow, heart. It's all right.* Gradually her perception slowed back down to real-time, and the outside world "sped up." That was when the station manager himself hailed her.

"Of course I'm sure they were trying to break in," she snapped in reply to his query, re-sending him her recordings, with close-ups on suspicious bulges under the coveralls that were the right size and placement for needlers and other weapons. She followed that with the bee-craft and the two men in the welding suits—headed straight for her. "And those pursuit craft certainly were *not* my imagination!" She raised her voice, both in volume and pitch. "I happen to be a fully trained graduate of Lab Schools! I'm not in the habit of imagining things!"

Now her adrenaline kicked in again, but this time from anger. They'd been in real danger—they could have been killed! And this idiot was talking to her as if she was some kind of—of joy-riding tweenie!

"I never said they were, ma'am," the station manager replied, taken somewhat aback. "I—"

"Just what kind of station are you running where a CS craft can be subject to this kind of security breach?" she continued wrathfully, running right over the top of him, now that she had the upper hand and some verbal momentum. "I'm reporting this to the Central Worlds Sector Coordinator on my *own* comlink!"

"You don't need to do that, ma—"

"And *furthermore*, I am standing off-station until you can give me a *high-security slip*!" she continued, really getting warmed up, and ready to demand all the considerations due a PTA. "My poor brawn is black and blue from head to toe from the knocking around he took, and lucky it wasn't worse! I want you to *catch* these people—"

"We're taking care of that, ma—" "And I want to know *everything* you learn from them *before* I dock again!" she finished, with a blast of feedback that punctuated her words and made him swear under his breath as the squeal pierced his ears. "Until then, I am going to *sit* out here and clog your approach lanes, and I don't particularly care whether you like it!"

And with that, she put him on "record" and let him splutter into a datahedron while she turned her attention to Alex.

He had a wad of tissues at his face, trying to staunch the blood from nose and lip, and his eyes above the tissues were starting to puff and turn dark. He was going to look like a raccoon before too long, with a double set of black eyes.

Obviously the first thing that had impacted with the couch was his face.

"Alex?" she said timidly. "Oh, Alex, I'm so sorry—I didn't mean—there wasn't time—"

"Ith awright," he replied thickly. "You di' okay. Din hab much choice. Hanneled ev' thing great, hanneled him great. You am gon moof for wile?"

She correctly interpreted that as praise for her handling of the situation and a query as to whether or not she planned on moving.

"No, I don't *plan* on it," she replied dryly. "But I hadn't *planned* on any of this in the first place."

He simply grunted, pried himself up painfully out of the acceleration couch and headed for their tiny sickbay to patch himself up.

She sent in a servo, discreetly, to clean up the blood in the sickbay and a second to take care of the mess in the main cabin, thanking her lucky stars that it *badn't* been worse. If Alex had been standing when she pulled that spin and acceleration instead of heading in the direction of the couch—

She didn't want to think about it. Instead, she ordered the kitchen to make ice-gel packs. Lots of them. And something soft for dinner.

They left as soon as the CS contingent arrived and spent a little time debriefing them. The CS folk showed up in a much fuller force than even Tia had expected. Not only Central Systems medical and administrative personnel—but a CenSec Military brainship, the C-P One-Oh-Four-One. Bristling with weaponry—

*And with the latest and greatest version of the Singularity Drive, no doubt, she thought, a little bitterly. Heaven only knows what their version can do. Bring its own Singularity Point with it, maybe.*

Whatever the administrators of Presley Station had *thought* they were going to get away with, they were soon dissuaded. The first person off the CenSec ship was a Sector Vice-Admiral; right behind him was an armed escort. He proclaimed the station to be under martial law, marched straight into the station manager's office, and within moments had the entire station swiftly and efficiently secured.

Tia had never been so happy to see anyone in her life. Within the hour all the witnesses and guilty parties

had been taken into military custody, and Tia confidently expected someone to call them and take their depositions at any time.

Alex still looked like someone had been interrogating him with rubber hoses, so when the brainship hailed them, she took the call, and let him continue nursing his aching head and bruises.

The ship number was awfully close to hers, although the military might not use standard CS brainship nomenclature. Still . . . *One-Oh-Four-One. That's close enough for the brain to have been in my class—*

"Tia, that is you, isn't it?" were the first words over the comlink. The "voice"—along with the sharp overtones and aggressive punch behind them—was very familiar.

"Pol?" she replied, wondering wildly what the odds were on *this* little meeting.

"In the shell and ready to kick some tail!" Pol responded cheerfully. "How the heck are you? Heard you had some trouble out here, and the Higher Ups said 'go,' so we came a-running."

"Trouble—you could say so." She sent him over her records of the short—but hair-raising, at least by her standards—flight, in a quick burst. He scanned them just as quickly, and sent a wordless blip of color and sound conveying mingled admiration and surprise. If he had been a sofite, he would have whistled.

"Not bad flying, if I do say so myself!" he said. "Like the way you cut right under that tug—maybe you should have opted for CenSec or Military."

"I don't think so," she replied. "That was more than enough excitement for the next decade for me."

"Suit yourself." Pol laughed, as if he didn't believe her. "My brawn wants to talk to your brawn. It's debriefing time."

She called Alex, who had been flat on his back in his bunk with an ice-gel pack on his black eyes. He staggered out to his chair and plopped down into it. For once, she thought, no one was going to notice his rumpled uniform—not with the black-blue-purple and green glory of his bruised face staring out of a screen.

"Line's open," she told Pol, activating the visual circuit.

As she had half expected, given her impressions of the candidates when she had been picking a brawn, it was Chria Chance who stared out of the screen, with surprise written all over her handsome features. She was still wearing her leather uniforms, Tia noticed—which argued powerfully for "Chria" being High Family. Little eccentricities like custom-tailored uniforms could be overlooked in someone who was both a High Family scion and had an excellent record of performance. Tia had no doubt that Chria's record was outstanding.

Tia noted also one difference between the Courier Service ships and the CenSec Couriers besides the armament. Directly behind Chria was another console and another comchair; this one held a thin, sharp-featured man in a uniform identical with Chria's, with an ornamental leather band or choker circling his long throat. He looked just as barbaric as she did. More, actually. He had the rangy, take-no-prisoners look of someone from one of the outer systems.

In short, he and Chria probably got along as if they had been made for each other.

"Frigging novas!" Chria exclaimed, after the first few seconds of staring. "Alex, what in blazes happened to you? Your dispatches never said anything about—did they?"

"Nobody worked me over, Brunhilde," Alex said tiredly, but with a hint of his customary humor. "So don't get your tights in a knot. This is all my own fault—or maybe just the fault of bad timing. It's the result of my face hitting my chair at—what was that acceleration, Tia?"

"About two gees," she said apologetically.

Chria shook her head in disbelief. "Huh. Well, shoot—here I was getting all ready to go on station and dent some heads to teach these perps some manners." She sat back in her chair and grinned at him. "Sorry about that, flyboy. Next time, strap in."

"Next time, maybe I'll have some warning," he replied. "Those clowns tried to jack us with no advance notice. New regs should require at least twenty-four hours warning before a hijacking. And forms filed in quad."

Chria laughed. "Right. You two have been making my people very happy, did you know that? Their nickname for you is 'Bird-dog,' because you've been flushing so much game out for us."

"No doubt." Alex copied her stance, except that where she steepled her hands in front of her chin, he rubbed his temple. "Do I assume that this is not a social call? As in, 'debriefing time?'"

"Oh, yes and no." She shrugged, but her eyes gleamed. "We don't really need to debrief you, but there's a couple of orders I have to pass. First of all, I've been ordered to tell you that if you've figured out where your rock-rat's treasure trove is, transmit the coordinates to us so we know where you're going, but get on out there as soon as you can move your tail. We'll send a followup, but right now we've got some high-level butts to bust here."

"Generous of you," Alex said dryly. "Letting us go in first and catch whatever flack is waiting. Are we still a 'Bird-dog,' or have we been elevated to 'Self-propelled trouble magnet?'"

Chria only laughed.

"Come on, flyboy, get with the team. There's still a Plague-spot out there, and you're the ones most likely to find it; we don't know what in Tophet we're looking for." She raised an eyebrow at him and he nodded in grudging agreement. "Then when you find it, you know how to handle it. I kind of gather that your people want the Plague stopped, but they also want their statues and what-all kept safe, too. What're Neil and I going to do, shoot the Bug down? He's hot on the trigger, but he's not up to potting microbes just yet!"

Behind her, the sharp-faced man shrugged in self-deprecation and grinned.

"So, if you've got a probable, let us know so we can keep an eye on you. Otherwise"—she spread her hands—"there's nothing we need you for. Fly free, little birds; the records you so thoughtfully bounced all over the

sector are all we need to convict these perps, wrap them up, and stick them where they have to pump in daylight."

"Here's what we have," Tia said before Alex could respond. She sent Pol duplicates of their best guesses. "As you can see, we have narrowed it down to three really good prospects. Only one of those has a record of sentient ruins, so that's the one we think is the most likely—I wish they'd logged something besides just 'presence of structures,' but there it is."

"Survey," Pol said succinctly. "Get lots of burnout cases in Survey. Well, what can you expect, going planet-hopping for months on end, dropping satellites, with nothing but an AI to keep you company? Sometimes surprised they don't go buggy, all things considered. I would."

Pol seemed much more convivial than Tia recalled him ever being, and completely happy with his brawn, and Chria had that relaxed look of a brawn with the perfect partner. But still—Chria had been an odd one, and Military and Central Security didn't let their brainships swap brawns without overwhelming reasons. Was Pol happy?

"Pol," Tia sent only to him, *"did you get a good one?"* Pol laughed, replying the same way. *"The best! I wouldn't trade off Chria or Neil for any combo in the Service. We three-up over here, you know—it's a double-brawn and brain setup; it's a fail-safe because we're armed. Chria's the senior officer, and Neil's the gunnery-mate, but Neil's been studying, and now he can double her on anything. Fully qualified. That's not usually the case, from what I hear."*

*"Why didn't he get his own brainship, then?"* she asked, puzzled. *"If he's fully qualified, shouldn't he get a promotion?"*

*"Who can figure softies?"* Pol said dismissively. *"He and Chria share her cabin. Maybe it's hormonal. How about you—you were saying you planned to be pretty picky about your brawn. Did they rush you, or did you get a good one?"*

There were a hundred things she could've said—many of which could have gotten her in a world of trouble if she answered as enthusiastically as she would've liked. *"Oh, Alex will do—when he's not shoving his face into chairs,"* she replied as lightly as she could. Pol laughed and made a few softie-jokes while Alex and Chria tied up all the loose ends that needed to be dealt with.

They were the only ship permitted to leave Presley #4 space—Chria hadn't been joking when she'd said that there was going to be a thorough examination of everything going on out here. On the other hand, not having to contend with other traffic was rather nice, all things considered.

Now if only they had a Singularity Drive . . .

*Never mind,* she told herself, as she accelerated to hyper. *I can manage without it. I just hope we don't have any more "help" from the opposition.*

This place didn't even have a name yet—just a chart designation. Epsilon Delta 177.3.3. Pol had called it right on

the nose—whoever had charted this place must have been a burnout case, or he would have at least tried to name it. That was one of the few perks of a Survey mission; most people took advantage of it.

It certainly had all the earmarks of the kind of place they were looking for; eccentric tilt, heavy cloud cover that spoke of rain or snow or both. But as Tia decelerated into the inner system, she suddenly knew that they *had* hit paydirt without ever coming close enough to do a surface scan.

There should have been a Survey satellite in orbit around their hot little prospect. This was a Terra-type planet; even with an eccentric tilt, eventually someone was going to want to claim it. The satellite should have been up there collecting data on planet three, on the entire system, and on the random comings and goings within the system, if any. It should have been broadcasting warnings to incoming ships about the system's status—charted but unexplored, under bioquarantine until checked out, possibly dangerous, native sentients unknown, landing prohibited.

The satellite was either missing or silent.

"Accidents do happen," Alex said cautiously, as Tia came in closer, decelerating steadily, and prepared to make orbit. "Sometimes those babies break."

She made a sound of disbelief. "Not often. And what are the odds? It should at *least* be giving us the navigational bleep, and there's nothing, nothing at all." She scanned for the satellite as she picked her orbital path, hoping to pick something up.

"Oh, Tia—look at that rotation, that orbit! It could have gotten knocked out of the sky by something. . . ." he began.

"Could have, but wasn't. I've got it, Alex," she said with glee. "I found it! And it's deader than a burned-out glow-tube."

She matched orbits with the errant satellite, coming alongside for a closer look. It was about half her size, so there was no question of bringing it inside, but as she circled it like a curious fish, there was one thing quite obvious.

Nothing was externally wrong with it.

"No sign of collision, and it wasn't shot at," Alex observed, and sighed. "No signs of a fire or explosion inside, either. You've tried reactivating it, I suppose?"

"It's not answering," she said firmly. "Guess what? You get to take a walk."

He muttered something under his breath, and went after his pressure suit. After the past few days in transition, his face had begun to heal, turning from black, blue and purple to a kind of dirty green and yellow. She presumed that the rest of him was in about the same shape—but he was obviously feeling rather sorry for himself.

*Do I snap at him, or do I kind of tease him along?* she wondered. He hadn't been in a particularly good mood since the call from Chria. Was it that he was still in pain? Or was it something else entirely? There were so many signals of softperson body-language that she'd never had a chance to learn, but there had been something going

on during that interview—not precisely between Alex and Chria, though. More like, going on *with* Alex, *because* of Chria.

Before she had a chance to make up her mind, he was at the airlock, suited up and tethered, and waiting for her to close the inner lock for him.

She berated herself for woolgathering and cycled the lock, keeping an anxious eye on him while she scanned the rest of the area for unexpected—and probably unwelcome—visitors.

*It would be just our luck for the looters to show up right about now.*

He jettied over to the access hatch of the satellite, and popped it without difficulty.

*Wait a moment—shouldn't he have had to unlock it?*

"Tia, the hatch was jimmied," he said, his breath rasping in the suit mike as he worked, heaving the massive door over and locking it down. "You were right, green all the way. The satellite's been sabotaged. Pretty crude work; they just disconnected the solar cells from the instrument pack. It'll still make orbital corrections, but that's all. Don't know why they didn't just knock it out of the sky, unless they figured Survey has some kind of telltale on it, and they'd show up if it went down."

"What should we do?" she asked uncertainly. "I know you can repair it, but should you? We need some of the information it can give us, but if you repair it, wouldn't they figure that Survey had been through? Or would they just not notice?"

"I don't want to reconnect the warn-off until we're ready to leave, or they'll definitely know someone's been eating their porridge," he replied slowly, as he floated half-in, half-out of the hatch. "If the satellite's telling them to take a hike as soon as they enter orbit, there won't be much doubt that someone from the authorities has been here. But you're right, and I not only want to know if someone shows up in orbit while we're down on the ground, I want the near-space scans it took before they shut it down, and I want it to keep scanning and recording. The question is, am I smart enough to make it do all that?"

"I want the planetary records," she told him. "With luck, the ruins may show up on the scans. We might even see signs of activity where the looters have been digging. As for, are you smart enough—if you can get the solar arrays reconnected, I can reprogram every function it has. I'm CS, remember? We do work for Survey sometimes, so I have the access codes for Survey satellites. Trust me, they're going to work; Survey never seems to think someone might actually want to sabotage one of their satellites, so they never change the codes."

"Good point." He writhed for a moment, upside-down, the huge blue-white globe behind him making an impressive backdrop. "Okay, give me a minute or two to splice some cable." Silence for a moment, except for grunts and fast breathing. "Good; it wasn't as awful as I thought. There. Solar array plugged back in. Ah, I have the link to the memory established. And—yes, everything is powering up, or at least that's what it looks like in here."



She triggered memory-dump, and everything came over in compressed mode, loud and clear. All the near-space scans and all the geophysical records that had been made before the satellite was disabled. Surface-scans in all weathers, had on many passes across the face of the planet.

But then—nothing. Whoever had disabled the satellite had known what he was doing—the memory that should have contained records of visitors was empty. She tried a number of ways of accessing it, only to conclude that the data storage device had been completely reformatted, nonsense had been written over all the memory, and it had been reformatted again. Not even an expert would have been able to get anything out of it now.

"Can you hook in the proximity alert with our com-system?" she asked.

"I think so." He braced himself against the hatch and shoved himself a little farther inside. "Yes, it's all modular. I can leave *just* that up and powered, and if they aren't listening on this band, they won't know that there's been anyone up here diddling with it."

A few moments more, and she caught a live signal on one of the high-range insystem comlinks, showing a nearby presence in the same orbit as the satellite. She felt her heart jump and started to panic—

Then she scolded herself for being so jumpy. It was the satellite, registering *her* presence, of course.

Alex closed the hatch and wedged it shut as it had been before, reeling himself back in on the tether. A moment later, her lock cycled, and he came back into the main cabin, pulling off his helmet and peeling off his suit.

Tia spent some time reprogramming the satellite, killing the warm-off broadcast, turning all the near-space scanners on and recording. Then she turned her attention to the recordings it had already made.

"So, what have we got?" he asked, wriggling to get the suit down over his hips. "Had any luck?"

"There's quite a few of those ruins," she said carefully, noting with a bit of jealousy that the survey satellite array was actually capable of producing sharper and more detailed images than her own. Then again, what it produced was rather limited.

"Well, that's actually kind of promising." He slid out of the suit and into the chair, leaving the pressure suit in a crumpled heap on the floor. She waited a moment until he was engrossed in the screen, then discreetly sent a servo to pick it up and the abandoned helmet up.

"I'd say here or here," he said at last, pointing out two of the ruins in or near one of the mountain ranges. "That would give us the rain-snow pattern the first victim raved about. Look, even in the same day you'd get snow in the morning, rain in the afternoon, and snow after dark during some seasons."

She highlighted those—but spotted three more possibilities, all three in areas where the tilt would have had the same effect on the climate. She marked them as well, and was rewarded by his nod of agreement.

"All right. This *has* to be the planet. There's no reason

for anyone to have disabled the satellite otherwise. Even if Survey or the Institute were sending someone here for a more detailed look, they'd simply have changed the warm-off message; they wouldn't have taken the satellite off-line." He took a deep breath, and some of the tension went out of his shoulders. "Now it's just going to be finding the right place."

This was work the computers could do while Tia slept; comparing their marked areas and looking for changes that were not due to the seasons or the presence or absence of snow. Highest on the priority list was to look for changes that indicated disturbance while there was snow on the ground. Digging and tramping about in the snow would darken it, no matter how carefully the looters tried to hide the signs of their presence. That was a sign that *only* the work of sentients or herd-beasts would produce, and herd-beasts were not likely to search ruins for food.

Within the hour, they had their site—no doubt whatsoever that it was being visited and disturbed regularly. Some of the buildings had even been meddled with.

"Now why would they do that?" Tia wondered out loud, as she increased the magnification to show that one of the larger buildings had mysteriously grown a repaired roof. "They can't need that much space—and how did they fix the roof within twenty-four hours?"

"They didn't," Alex said flatly. "That's plastic stretched over the hole. As to *why*—the hole is just about big enough to let a twenty-man ship land inside. Hangar and hiding place all in one."

They changed their position to put them in geosynchronous orbit over their prize—and detailed scans of the spot seemed to indicate that no one had visited it very recently. The snow was still pristine and white, and the building she had noted had a major portion of its roof missing again.

"That's it," Alex said with finality.

Tia groaned. "We know—and we can't prove it. We know for a fact that someone is meddling with the site, but we can't prove the site is the one with the Plague. Not without going down."

"Oh, come on, Tia, where's your sense of adventure?" Alex asked feebly. "We knew we were probably going to have to go down on the surface. All we have to do is go down and get some holos of the area just like the ones Hank took. Then we have our proof."

"My sense of adventure got left back when I was nearly hijacked," she replied firmly. "I can do without adventure, thank you."

And she couldn't help herself; she kept figuratively glancing over her shoulder, watching for a ship—

Would it be armed? She couldn't help but think of Pol, bristling with weaponry, and picturing those weapons aimed at her.

Unarmed. Unarmored. Not even particularly fast.

On the other hand, she was a *brainship*, wasn't she? The product of extensive training. Surely if she couldn't outrun or outshoot these people, she could outthink them. . . .

*Surely.*

Well, if she was going to outthink them, the first thing she should do would be to find a way to keep them from spotting her. So it was time to use those enhanced systems on the satellite to their advantage.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked when she remained silent for several minutes, sending the manual-override signal to the satellite so that she could use the scanners.

"I'm looking for a place to hide," she told him. "Two can play that game. And I'm smaller than their ship; I shouldn't need a building to hide me. I'll warn you, though, I may have to park a fair hike away from the cache sites."

It took a while; several hours of intense searching, while Alex did what he could to get himself prepared for the trip below. That amounted mostly to recharging his pressure suit for a long stay; stocking it with condensed food and water, making certain the suit systems were up to a week-long tour, if it came to that. Recharging the power cells, triple-checking the seals—putting tape on places that tended to rub and a bit of padding on places that didn't quite fit—everything that could be done to his suit, Alex was doing. They both knew that from the time he left her airlock to the time he returned and she could purge him and the lock with hard vacuum, he was going to have to stay in it.

Finally, in mid-afternoon by the local time at the site below them, she found what she was looking for.

"I found my hiding place," she said into the silence, startling him into jumping. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," he said, a little too jauntily. Was it her imagination, or did he turn a little pale? Well, if she had been capable of it, she'd have done the same. As it was, she was so jittery that she finally had to alter her blood chemistry a little to deal with it.

"Then strap down," she told him soberly. "We're heading right into a major weather system and there's no getting around it. This is going to be tricky, and the ride is likely to be pretty rough."

Alex took the time to strap down more than himself; he made a circuit of the interior, ensuring that anything loose had been properly stowed before taking his place in the comchair. Only then, when he was double-strapped in, did Tia make the burn that began their descent.

Their entry was fairly smooth until they were on final approach and hit thick atmosphere and the weather that rode the mid-levels. The wild storm winds of a blizzard buffeted her with heavy blows; gusts that came out of nowhere and flung her up, down, in any direction but the one she wanted. She fought her way through them with grim determination, wondering how on earth the looters had gotten this far. Surely with winds like this, the controls would be torn right out of the grip of a soft-person's hands!

Of course, they could be coming down under the control of an AI. Once the course had been programmed in, the AI would hold to it. And within limits, it would deal with unexpected conditions all the way to the surface.

Within limits; that was the catch. Throw it too far off the programmed course and it wouldn't know what to do.

*Never mind,* she told herself. *You need to get down there yourself!*

A little lower, and it wasn't just wind she was dealing with; it was snow. A howling blizzard, to be precise—one that chilled her skin and caked snow to every surface, throwing off her balance by tiny increments, forcing her to recalculate her descent all the way to the ground. A strange irony: she who had never seen weather as a child was now having to deal with weather at its wildest. . . .

Then suddenly, as she approached the valley she had chosen, the wind died to a mere zephyr. Snow drifted down in picture-perfect curtains—totally obscuring visuals, of course, but that was why she was on instruments anyway. She killed forward thrusters and went into null-grav; terribly draining of power, but the only way she could have the control she needed at this point. She inched her way into her chosen valley, using the utmost of care. The spot where she wanted to set down was just big enough to hold her—and right above it, if the readings she'd gotten from above were holding true, there was a big buildup of snow. Just enough to avalanche down and cover her, if she was very careful not to set it off prematurely.

She eased her way into place with the walls of the valley less than a hand-span away from her skin: a brief look at Alex showed him clenching teeth and holding armrests with hands that were white-knuckled. He could read the instruments as well as she could. Well, she'd never set down into a place that was quite this narrow before. And certainly she had never set down under conditions that might change in the next moment. . . .

If that blizzard behind them came howling up this valley, it could catch her and send her right into the valley wall.

There. She tucked herself into the bottom of the valley and felt her "feet" sink through the snow to the rock beneath. Nice, solid rock. Snow-covered rocks on either side.

And above—the snowcrest. Waiting.

*Here goes—*

She activated an external speaker and blasted the landscape with shatter-rock, bass turned to max.

And the world fell in.

"Are you going to be able to blast free of this?" Alex asked for the tenth time, as another servo came in from the airlock to recharge.

"It's not that bad," she said confidently. She was *much* happier with four meters of snow between her and the naked sky. Avalanches happened all the time; there was nothing about this valley to signal to the looters that they'd been discovered, and that a ship was hiding here. Not only that, but the looters could prance around *on top of her* and never guess she was there unless they found the tunnel her servos were cutting to the surface. And she didn't think any of them would have the temerity to crawl down what *might* be the den-tunnel of a large predator.

"If it's not that bad," Alex said fretfully, "then why is it taking forever to melt a tunnel up and out?"

"Because no one ever intended these little servos to have to do something like that," she replied, as patiently as she could. "They're *welders*, not snow-clearers. And they have to reinforce the tunnel with plastic shoring-posts so it doesn't fall in and trap you." He shook his head; she gave up trying to explain it. "They're almost through, anyway," she told him. "It's about time to get into your suit."

That would keep him occupied.

"This thing is getting depressingly familiar," he complained. "I see more of the inside of this suit than I do my cabin."

"No one promised you first-class accommodations on this ride," she teased, trying to keep from showing her own nervousness. "I'll tell you what; how about if I have one of the servos make a nice set of curtains for your helmet?"

"Thanks. I think." He made a face at her. "Well, I'll tell you this much; if I have to keep spending this much time in the blasted thing, I'm going to have some comforts built into it—or demand they get me a better model." He twisted and turned, making sure he still had full mobility. "The sanitary facilities leave a lot to be desired." "I'll report your complaints to the ship's steward," she told him. "Meanwhile—we have breakout."

"Sounds like my cue." Alex sighed. "I hope this isn't going to be as cold as it looks."

Alex crawled up the long, slanting tunnel to the surface, lighting his way with the worklamp on the front of his helmet. Not that there was much to see—just a white, shiny tunnel that seemed to go on forever, reaching into the cold darkness . . . as if, with no warning, he would find himself entombed in ice forever. The plastic reinforcements were as white as the snow; invisible unless you were looking for them. Which was the point, he supposed. But he was glad they were there. Without them, tons of snow and ice could come crashing down on him at any moment. . . .

*Stop that*, he told himself sharply. *Now is not the time to get claustrophobia.*

Still, there didn't seem to be any end to the tunnel—and he was cold, chilled right down to the soul. Not physically cold, or so his readouts claimed. Just chilled by the emptiness, the sterility. The loneliness . . .

*You're doing it again. Stop it.*

Was the surrounding snow getting *lighter*? He turned off his helmet light—and it was true, there was a kind of cool, blue light filtering down through the ice and snow! And up ahead—yes, there was the mouth of the tunnel, as promised, a round, white "eye" staring down at him!

He picked up his pace, eager to get out of there. The return trip would be *nothing* compared to this long, tedious crawl—just sit down and push away, and he would be able to slide all the way down to the airlock!

He emerged into thickly falling snow, and saw that the servos had wrought better than he and Tia had guessed, for the mouth of the tunnel was outside the area of the avalanche, just under an overhanging ridge of stone. That must have been what the snow had built

up upon; small wonder it buried Tia four meters under when she triggered it! Fortunately, snow could be melted; when they needed to leave, she could fire up her thrusters and increase the surface temperature of her skin, and turn it all to water and steam. Well, that was the theory, anyway.

That was assuming it didn't rain and melt away her cover before then.

By Tia's best guess, it was late afternoon, and he should be able to get to the site and look around a little before dark fell. At that point, the best thing he could do would be to get under cover somewhere and curl up for the night. *This* time he had padded all the uncomfortable spots in the suit, and he'd worn soft, old, exercise clothing. It shouldn't be any less comfortable than some of his bunks as a cadet.

He took a bearing from the heads-up display inside his helmet, and headed for the site.

"Tia," he called. "Tia, come in."

"Reading you loud and clear, Alex," she responded immediately. Funny how easy it was to think of her as a person sitting back in that ship, eyes glued to the screens that showed his location, hands steady on the controls—

*Stop that. Maybe it's a nice picture, but it's one that can get you in more trouble than you already have.* "Tia, we have the right place, all right." He toggled his external suit camera and gave her a panoramic sweep from his vantage-point above the valley holding the site. It was fairly obvious that this place was subject to some pretty heavy-duty windstorms; the buildings were all built into the lee of the hills, and the hills themselves had been sculpted by the prevailing winds until they looked like cresting waves. No doubt either why the entities who built this place used rounded forms; less for the winds to catch on.

"Does this look like any architecture in your banks?" he asked, panning across the buildings. "I sure as heck don't recognize it."

"Nothing here," she replied, fascination evident in her voice. "This is amazing! That's not metal, I don't think—could it be ceramic?"

"Maybe some kind of synthetic," Alex hazarded. "Plague or not, there are going to be murders done over the right to excavate this place. How in the name of the spirits of space did that Survey tech just dismiss this with 'presence of structures'?"

"We'll never know," Tia responded. "Well, since there can't be two sites like this in this area, and since these buildings match the ones in Hank's holos, we can at least assume that we have the right planet. Now, about the caches—"

"I'm going down," he said, feeling for footholds in the snow. It crunched under his feet as he eased down sideways, one careful step at a time. Now that he was out of Tia's valley, there were signs everywhere of freeze-thaw cycles. Under the most recent layer of snow, the stuff was dirty and covered with a crust of granular ice. It made for perilous walking. "The wind is

picking up, by the way. I think that blizzard followed us in."

"That certainly figures," she said with resignation.

As he eased over the lip of the valley, he saw the caves—or rather, storage areas—cut into the protected side of the face of a lower-level canyon cutting through the middle of the valley. There were more buildings down there, too, and some kind of strange pylons—but the "caves" interested him the most. Regular, ovoid holes cut into the earth and rock that were then plugged with something rather like cement, a substance slightly different in color from the surrounding earth and stone. Those nearest him were still sealed; those nearest the building with the appearing-disappearing roof were open.

He worked his way down the valley to the buildings, and found to his relief that there was actually a kind of staircase cut into the rock, going down to the second level. Protected from the worst of the weather by the building in front of it, while it was a bit slippery, it wasn't as hazardous as his descent into the valley had been.

It was a good thing that the contents of Hank's cabin and the holos the man had taken had prepared Alex for what he saw.

The wall of the valley where the storage caves had been opened looked like the inside of Ali Baba's cave. The storage caches proved to be much smaller than Alex had thought; the "window" slits in the nearby building were tiny, as might have been expected in a place with the kind of punishing weather this planet had. That had made the caches themselves appear much larger in the holos. In reality, they were about as tall as his waist, and no deeper than two or three meters. That was more than enough to hold a king's ransom in treasure. . . .

Much hadn't even been taken. In one of the nearest, ceramic statuary and pottery had been left behind as worthless—some had even been broken by careless handling, and Alex winced.

There were dozens of caches that had been opened and cleaned out; perhaps a dozen more with less desirable objects still inside. There were dozens more, still sealed, running down the length of the canyon wall—

And one whose entrance had been sealed with some kind of a heat-weapon, a weapon that had been turned on the entrance until the rock slagged and melted metal ran with it, mingling and forming a new, permanent plug.

"Do you think that's where the Plague Bug came from?" Tia asked in his ear.

"I think it's a good bet, anyway," he said absently. "I sure hope so, anyway."

Suddenly, with the prospect of contamination looming large in his mind, the shine of metal and sheen of priceless ceramic lost its allure. *Whether it is or isn't, there is no way I am going to crack this suit, I don't care what is out there.* Hank and the other man drifted in his memory like grisly ghosts. The suit, no longer a prison, had just become the most desirable place in the universe.

*Oh, I just love this suit. . . .*

Nevertheless, he moved forward toward the already opened caches, augmenting the fading light with his

suit-lamp. The caches themselves were very old; that much was evident from the weathering and buildup of debris and dirt along the side of the canyon wall. The looters must have opened up one of the caches out of sheer curiosity or by accident while looking for something else. Perhaps they had been exploring the area with an eye to a safe haven. Whatever had led them to uncover the first, they had then cleared away the buildup all along the wall, exposing the rest. And it looked as if the loot of a thousand worlds had been tucked away here.

He began taking careful holos of everything that had been left behind, Tia recording the tiniest details as he covered every angle, every millimeter. At least this way, if anything more was smashed there would be a record of it. Some things he picked up and stashed in his pack to bring back with him; a curious metal book, for instance—

Alex moved forward again, reaching out for a discarded ceramic statue of some kind of winged biped—

"Alex!" Tia exclaimed urgently. He started back, his hand closing on empty air.

"What?" he snapped. "I—"

"Alex, you have to get back here *now*," she interrupted. "The alarms just went off. They're back, and they're heading in to land right now!"

"Alex!" Tia cried, as her readouts showed the pirates making their descent bum and Alex moving *away* from her, not back in. "Alex, what are you doing?"

Dusk was already making it hard to see out there, even for her. She couldn't imagine what it was like for him.

"I'm going to hide out in the upper level of one of these buildings and watch these clowns," Alex replied calmly. "There's a place up on this one where I can get in at about the second-story level—see?"

He was right; the structure of the building gave him easy hand- and footholds up to the window-slits on the second floor. Once there, since the building had fallen in at that point, he would be able to hide himself up above eye level. And with the way that the blizzard was kicking up, his tracks would be hidden in a matter of moments.

"But—" she protested. "You're all alone out there!" She tried to keep her mind clear, but a thousand horrible possibilities ran around and around inside her thoughts, making her frantic. "There's no way I can help you if you're caught!"

"I won't be caught," he said confidently, finding handholds and beginning his climb.

It was already too late anyway; the pirates had begun entry. Even if he left now, he'd never make it back to the safety of the tunnel before they landed. If they had heat sensors, they couldn't help noticing him, scrambling across the snow.

She poured relaxants into her blood and tried to stay as calm as he obviously felt, but it wasn't working. As the looters passed behind the planet's opposite side, he reached the top of the first tier of window-slits, moving

slowly and deliberately—so deliberately that she wanted to scream at him to hurry.

As they hit the edge of the blizzard, Alex reached the broken place in the second story. And just as he tumbled over the edge into the relatively safe darkness behind the wall, they slowed for descent, playing searchlights all over the entire valley, cutting pathways of brightness against the gloom and thickly falling snow.

Alex took advantage of the lights, moving only after they had passed so that he had a chance to see exactly what lay in the room he had fallen into.

Nothing, actually; it was an empty section with a curved inner and outer wall, one door in the inner wall, and a wall at either end. Roughly half of the curving roof had fallen in; not much, really. Dirt and snow mounded under the break; near the join of end wall and outer wall the windows were still intact, and the floor was relatively clean. That was where Alex went.

From there he had a superb view of both the caches and the building that the looters were slowly lowering their ship into. Tia watched carefully, and decided that her guess about an AI insystem pilot was probably correct; the movements of the ship had the jerkiness she associated with AIs. She kept expecting the looters to pick up Alex's signal, but evidently they were not expecting anyone to find this place—they seemed to be taking no precautions whatsoever. They didn't set any telltales or any alerts, and once they landed the ship and began disembarking from it, they made no effort to maintain silence.

On the other hand, given the truly appalling weather, perhaps they had no reason to be cautious. The worst of the blizzard was moving in, and not even the best of AIs could have landed in *that* kind of buffeting wind. She was just glad that Alex was under cover.

The storm didn't stop the looters from sending out crews to open up a new cache, however. . . .

She could hardly believe her sensors when she saw, via Alex's camera, a half-dozen lights bobbing down the canyon floor toward his hiding place. She switched to IR scan and saw that there were three times that many men, three to a light. None of them were wearing pressure suits, although they were bundled up in cold-weather survival gear.

"I don't believe they're doing that," Alex muttered.

"Neither do I," she replied softly. "That storm is going to be a killing blizzard in a moment. They're out of their minds."

She scanned up and down the radio wavelengths, looking for the one the looters were using. She found it soon enough, unmistakable by the paint-peeling language being used. While Alex huddled in his shelter, the men below him broke open yet another cache and began shoveling what were probably priceless artifacts into sacks as if they were so many rocks. Tia winced, and thought it likely that Alex was doing the same.

The looters were obviously aware that they were working against time; their haste alone showed the fact that they knew the worst of the storm was yet to come. Whoever was manning the radio back at the ship kept

them apprised of their situation, and before long, he began warning them that it was time to start back, before the blizzard got so bad they would never be able to make it the few hundred meters back to their ship.

They would not be able to take the full fury of the storm—but Alex, in his pressure suit, would be able to handle just about anything. With his heads-up helmet displays, he didn't need to be able to see where he was going. Was it possible that he would be able to sneak back to her under the cover of the blizzard?

It was certainly worth a try.

The leader of the looters finally growled an acknowledgement to the radio operator. "We're comin' in, keep yer boots on," he snarled, as the lights turned away from the cache and moved slowly back up the canyon. The operator shut up; a moment later a signal beacon shone wanly through the thickening snow at the other end of the tiny valley. Soon the lights of the looters had been swallowed up by darkness and heavy snowfall; then the beacon faded as the snow and wind picked up still more.

"Alex," she said urgently, "do you think you can make it back to me?"

"Did you record me coming in?" he asked.

"Yes," she assured him. "Every step. I ought to be able to guide you pretty well. You won't get a better chance. Without the storm to cover you, they'll spot you before you've gone a meter."

He peered out his window again, her camera "seeing" what he saw—there was nothing out there. Wind and snow made a solid wall just outside the building. Even Tia's IR scan couldn't penetrate it.

"I'll try it," he said. "You're right. There won't ever be a better chance."

Alex ignored the darkness outside his helmet and concentrated on the HUD projected on the inner surface. This was a lot like fly-by-wire training—or virtual reality. Ignore what your eyes and senses wanted you to do, and concentrate on what the instruments are telling you.

Right now, they said he was near the entrance to the valley hiding Tia.

It had been a long, frightening walk. The pressure suit was protection against anything that the blizzard flung at him, but if he made a wrong step—well, it wouldn't save him from a long fall. And it wouldn't save him from being crushed by an avalanche if something triggered another one. Snow built up quickly under conditions like this.

It helped to think of Tia as he imagined her; made him feel warm inside. She kept a cheerful monologue going in his left ear, telling him what she had identified from the holos they'd made before the looters arrived. Sometimes he answered her; mostly he just listened. She was warmth and life in a world of darkness and cold, and as long as he could think of her sitting in the pilots' seat, with her sparkling eyes and puckish smile, he could muster the strength to keep his feet moving against the increasingly heavy weight of the snow.

Tired—he was getting so tired. It would be tempting

to lie down and let the snow cover him for a while as he took a little rest.

"Alex—you're here—" she said suddenly, breaking off in the middle of the sentence.

"I'm where?" he said stupidly. He was so tired. . . .

"You're here—the entrance to the tunnel is somewhere around there—" The urgency in her voice woke him out of the kind of stupor he had been in. "Feel around for the rock face—the tunnel may be covered with snow, but you should be able to find it."

That was something he hadn't even thought of! What if the entrance to the tunnel had filled in? He'd be stuck out here in the blizzard, nowhere to go, out alone in the cold!

*Stop that!* he told himself sternly. *Just stop that! You'll be all right. The suit heaters won't give out in this—they're made for space, a little blizzard isn't going to balk them!*

Unless the cold snow clogged them somehow . . . or the wind was too much for them to compensate for . . . or they just plainly gave up and died. . . .

He stumbled to his right, hands out, feeling frantically in the darkness for the rock face. He stumbled into it, cracking his faceplate against the stone. Fortunately the plate was made of sterner stuff than simple polyglas; although his head rang, the plate was fine.

Well, there was the rock. Now *where*—

The ground gave away beneath his feet, and he yelled with fear as he fell. The back of his head smacked against something and he kept falling—

No—

No, he wasn't falling, he was sliding. He'd fallen into the tunnel!

Quickly he spread hands and feet against the wall of the tunnel to slow himself and toggled his headlamp on. It had been useless in the blizzard; now it was still pretty useless, but the light reflecting from the white ice above his face made him want to laugh with pleasure. Light! At last!

Light—and more of it down below his feet. The opposite end of the tunnel glowed with warm, white light as Tia opened the airlock and turned on the light inside it. He shot down the long dark tunnel into the brightness, no longer caring if he hit hard when he landed. Caring only that he was coming home.

Coming home. . . .

The whisper of a sensor sweep across the landscape—like the brush of silk across Tia's skin, when she'd had skin. Like something not quite heard in the distance.

Tia stayed quiet, and concentrated on keeping all of her outputs as low as possible. *We aren't here. You can't find us. Why don't you just fill your holds and go away?*

What had been a good hiding place was now a trap. Tia had shut down every system she could; Alex moved as little as possible. She had no way of knowing how sophisticated the pirates' systems were, so they were both operating on the assumption that anything out of the ordinary would alert the enemy to their presence, if not their location.

Whether the looters' initial carelessness had been be-

cause of the storm or because of greed—or whether they had been alerted by something she or Alex had done—now they were displaying all the caution Tia had expected of them. Teltales and alarms were in place; irregular sensor sweeps made it impossible for Alex to make a second trip to the ruins without being caught.

And now there were two more ships in orbit that had arrived while the blizzard still raged. One of those two ships had checked the satellite. Had they found Alex's handiwork, or were they simply following a procedure they had always followed? She had no way of knowing.

Whatever the case, those two ships kept her from taking off—and she wasn't going to transmit *anything* to the satellite. It was still broadcasting, and they only hoped it was because the pirates hadn't checked that closely. But it could have been because the pirates wanted them lulled into thinking they were safe.

So Tia had shut off all nonessential systems, and they used no active sensors, relying entirely on passive receptors. Knowing that sound could carry even past her blanket of snow, especially percussive sounds, Alex padded about in stocking feet when he walked at all. Three days of this now—and no sign that the looters were ready to leave yet.

Mostly he and Tia studied holos and the few artifacts that he had brought out of the cache area—once Tia had vacuum-purged them and sterilized them to a fare-thee-well.

After all, she kept telling herself, the pirates couldn't stay up there forever. Could they?

Unless they had some idea that Tia was already here. *Someone* had leaked what they knew about Hank and his cargo when they were on Presley Station. The leak could have gone beyond the station.

She was frightened, and could not tell him; strung as tightly as piano strings with anxiety, with no way to work off the tension.

She knew that the same thoughts troubled Alex, although he never voiced them. Instead, he concentrated his attention completely on the enigmatic book of metal plates he had brought out of the cache.

There were glyphs of some kind etched into it, along the right edge of each plate, and a peculiarly matte-finished strip along the left edge of each. But most importantly, the middle of each page was covered with the pinprick patterns of what could only be stellar configurations. Having spent so much time studying stellar maps, both of them had recognized that they *were* nav-guides immediately. But to what—and far more importantly, what was the reference point? There was no way of knowing that she could see.

And who had made the book in the first place? The glyphs had an odd sort of familiarity about them, but nothing she was able to put a figurative finger on.

It was enough of a puzzle to keep Alex busy, but not enough to occupy her. It was very easy to spend a lot of time brooding over her brawn. Slumped in his chair, peculiarly handsome face intent, with a single light shining down on his head and the artifact, with the rest of the room in darkness—or staring into a screen full of data—



Like a scene out of a thriller-holo. The hero, biding his time, ready to crack under the strain but not going to show his vulnerability; the enemies waiting above. Priceless data in their hands, data that they dared not allow the enemy to have. The hero, thinking about the lover he had left behind, wondering if he will ever see her again—

*Shellcrack.* This was getting her nowhere.

She couldn't pace, she couldn't bite her nails, she couldn't even read to distract herself. Finally she activated a single servo and sent it discreetly into his cabin to clean it. It hadn't been cleaned since they'd left the base; mostly Alex had just shoved things into drawers and closets and locked the doors down. She couldn't clean his clothing now, but as soon as they shook the hounds off their trail—

If they shook the hounds off their trail—if the second avalanche and the blizzard hadn't piled too much snow on top of them to clear away. There were eight meters of snow up there now, not four. Much more, and she might not be able to blast free.

*Stop that. We'll get out of this.*

Carefully she cleaned each drawer and closet, replacing what wasn't dirty and having the servo kidnap what was. Carefully, because there were lots of loose objects shoved in with the clothing.

But she never expected the one she found tumbled in among the bedcoverings.

A holocube—of her.

She turned the cube over and over in the servo's pinchers, changing the pictures, finding all of them familiar. Scenes of her from before her illness; the birthday party, posing with Theodore Bear—

Standing in her brand new pressure suit in front of a fragment of wall covered with EsKay glyphs—that was a funny one; Mum had teased Dad about it because he'd focused on the glyphs out of habit. She'd come out half out of the picture, but the glyphs had been nice and sharp.

It hit her like a jolt of current. The glyphs. *That* was where she had seen them before! Oh, these were carved rather than inscribed, and time and sandstorms had worn them down to mere suggestions; and they were formed in a kind of cursive style, where the ones on the book were angular—but—

She ran a quick comparison, and got another jolt, this time of elation. "Alex!" she whispered excitedly. "Look!"

She popped the glyphs from the old holo up on her screen as he looked up; took the graphic of the third page of the book, and superimposed the one over the other. Aside from the differences in style, they were a perfect match.

"EsKays," he murmured, his tone awestruck. "Spirits of space—this book was made by the EsKays!"

"I think these caches and buildings must have been made by some race that knew the EsKays," she replied. "But even if they weren't—Alex, how much will you wager that this little set of charts shows the EsKay homeworld, once you figure out how to decipher it?"

"It would make sense," he said after a moment. "Look

at this smooth area on every page—always in the same place along the edge. I bet this is some kind of recording medium, like a datahedron—maybe optical—"

"Let me look at it," she demanded. "Put it in the lab."

Now she had something to keep *her* attention.

And something to keep her mind off him.

Alex had nothing more to do but read and brood. While Tia bent all the resources at her disposal on the artifact, he was left staring at screens and hoping the pirates didn't think to scan for large masses of metal under the snow.

Reading palled after too long; music was out because it could be detected, even if he were wearing headphones, and he hated headphones. He'd never been much of one for entertainment holos, and they made at least as much noise as music.

That left him alone in the dark with his thoughts, which kept turning back toward Tia. He knew her childhood very well now—accessing the data available publicly and then doing the unthinkable, at least for anyone in the BB program; contacting Doctor Kennet and Doctor Anna, and pumping them for information. Not with any great subtlety, he feared, but they hadn't taken it amiss. Of course, if anyone in CS found out what he'd been doing, he would be in major trouble. There was an ugly name for his feeling about Tia.

Fixation.

After that single attempt at finding a temporary companion in port, Alex had left the women alone—because he kept picking ones who looked like Tia. He had thought it would all wear off after a while; that sooner or later, since nothing could be done about it, the fascination would fade away.

And meanwhile, or so he'd told himself, it only made sense to learn as much about Tia as he could. She was unique; the oldest child ever to have been put into a shell. He had to be very careful with someone like that; the normal parameters of a brain-brawn relationship simply would not apply.

So now he knew what she had looked like—and, thanks to computer projection, what she would have looked like if she had never caught that hideous disease and had grown up normally. Why, she might even have wound up at the Academy, if she hadn't chosen to follow in her famous parents' footsteps. He knew most of the details, not only of her pre-shell life, but of her life<sup>4</sup> at Lab Schools. He knew as much about her as he would have if she had been his own sibling—except that his feelings about her had been anything but brotherly.

But he had told himself that they *were* brotherly, that he was not falling in love with a kind of ghost, that everything would be fine. He'd believed it, too.

Until he ran into Chria Chance and her gunner.

There was *no* doubt in his mind from the moment the screen lit up that Chria and Neil were an Item. The signs were there for anyone who knew how to read body language, especially for someone who knew Chria as well as Alex did. And his initial reaction to the relationship caught him completely by surprise.

Envy. Sheer, raw, uncomplicated envy. Not jealousy, for he wasn't at all interested in Chria and never had been. In some ways, he was very happy for her; she had been truly the poor little rich girl—High Family with four very proper brothers and sisters who were making the Family even more prestige and money. She alone had been the rebel; she of all of them had wanted something more than a proper position, a place on a Board of Directors, and a bloodless, loveless, high-status spouse. After she threatened to bring disgrace on all of them, blackmailing them by swearing she would join a shatter-rock synthocom-band under her real name, they had permitted her the Academy under an assumed one.

No, he was happy for Chria; she had found exactly the life and partners that she had longed for.

But he *wanted* what she had—only he wanted it *with* Tia sitting back there in the second seat. Or Tia in the front and himself in the back; it didn't much matter who was the one in command, if he could have had her *there*.

The strength of his feelings had been so unexpected that he had not known what to do with them—so he had attempted, clumsily, to cover them. Fortunately, everyone involved seemed to put his surliness down to a combination of pain from his injuries and wooziness due to the pain pills he'd gulped.

If only it had been . . .

*I'm in love with someone I can't touch, can't bold, can't even tell that I love her*, he thought with despair, clenching his hand tightly on the armrest of his chair. *I—*

"Alex?" Tia whispered, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the silence of the ship, for she had turned even the ventilation system down to a minimum. "Alex, I've decoded the storage mode. It's old-fashioned hard-etched binary storage, and I think it's nav directions that relate to the stellar map on the page. Once I find a reference point I recognize, I'm pretty sure I can decode it all eventually. I got some ideas, though, since I was able to match some place-name glyphs—and we were right—I'm positive that these are directions to all the EsKay bases from the homeworld! So we could just find a base—"

"And trace it back!" This was what she'd been looking for from the beginning, and excitement for her shoved aside all other feelings for the moment. "What's the deal—why the primitive nav-charts? Not that it isn't a break for us, but if they were spacegoing, why limit yourself to a crawl?"

"Well, the storage medium is pretty hard to damage; you wouldn't believe how strong it is. So I can see why they chose it over something like a datahedron that a strong magnetic field can wipe. As for why the charts themselves are so primitive, near as I can make out, they didn't have Singularity Drive and they could or would only warp *between* stars, using them as navigational stepping-stones. I don't know why; there may be something there that would give the reason, but I can't decode it." There was something odd and subdued about her voice—

"What, hopping like a Survey ship?" he asked incredulously. "You could spend years getting across space that way!"

"Maybe they didn't care. Maybe hyper made them sick." Now he recognized what the odd tone in her voice was; she didn't seem terribly excited, now that she had what she was looking for.

"Well, *we* don't have to do that," he pointed out. "Once we get out of here, we can backtrack to the EsKay homeworld, make a couple of jumps, and we'll be stellar celebs! All we have to do is—"

"Is forget about our responsibilities," she said sharply. "Or else 'forget' to turn in this book with the rest of the loot until we get a long leave. Or turn it in and hope no one else beats us to the punch."

Keeping the book was out of the question, and he dismissed it out of hand. "They won't," he replied positively. "No one else has spent as much time staring at star charts as we have. You've said as much yourself; the archeologists at the Institute get very specialized, and see things in a very narrow way. I don't think that there's the slightest chance that anyone will figure out what this book means within the next four or five years. But you're right about having responsibilities; we *are* under a hard contract to the Institute. We'll have to wait until we can buy or earn a long leave—"

"That's not what's bothering me," she interrupted softly. "It's the ethics of it. If we hold back this information, how are we any better than those pirates out there?"

"How do you mean?" he asked, startled.

"Withholding information—that's like data piracy, in a way. We're holding back, not only the data, but the career of whoever is the EsKay specialist right now—Doctor Lana Courtney-Rai, I think. In fact, if we keep this to ourselves, we'll be *stealing* her career advancement. I mean, we aren't even *real* archeologists!" There was no mistaking the distress in her voice.

"I think I see what you mean." And he could understand it all too well. He'd seen both his parents passed over for promotions in favor of someone who hadn't earned the advancement, but who "knew the right people." He'd seen the same thing happen at the Academy. It wasn't fair or right. "We can't do everything, can we?" he said, slowly. "Not like in the holos, where the heroes can fight off pirates while performing brain surgery."

Tia made a sad little chuckle. "I'm beginning to think it's all we can do just to get our real job done right."

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "Funny. When this quest of ours was all theoretical, it was one thing—but we really can't go shooting off by ourselves and still do our duty, the duty that people are expecting us to do."

She didn't sigh, but her voice was heavy with regret. "It's not only a question of ethics, but of priorities. We can simply go on doing what we do best—and Chria Chance really put her finger on it, when she pointed out that she and Neil and Pol wouldn't know how to recognize our Plague spot, and we would. *She* knows when she should let the experts take over. I hate to give up on the dream—but in this case, that dream was the kind of thing a kid could have, but—"

"But it's time to grow up—and let someone else play," Alex said firmly.

"Maybe we could go pretend to be archeologists," Tia added, "but we'd steal someone else's career in the process. Become second-rate—but very, very lucky—amateur pot-hunters."

He sighed for both of them. "They'd hate us, you know. Everyone we respected would hate us. And we'd be celebrities, but we wouldn't be real archeologists."

"Alex?" she said, after a long silence. "I think we should just seal that book up with our findings and what we've deduced about it. Then we should lock it up with the rest of the loot, and go on being a stellar CS team. Even if it does get awfully boring running mail and supplies, sometimes."

"It's not boring now," he said ruefully, without thinking. "I kind of wish it was."

Silence for a long time, then she made a tiny sound that he would have identified as a whimper in a softer person. "I wish you hadn't reminded me," she said.

"Why?"

"Because it seems as if we're never going to get out of here—that they're going to find us eventually."

"Stop that," he replied sharply, reacting to the note of panic in her voice. "They can't hover up there forever. They'll run out of supplies, for one thing."

"So will we," she countered.

"And they'll run out of patience! Tia, think—these are pirates, and they don't even know there's anyone else here, not for certain, anyway! When they don't find anything, they'll give up and take their loot off to sell." He wanted, badly, to pace—but that would make noise. "We can leave when they're gone."

"If . . . we can get out."

"What?" he said, startled.

"I didn't want you to worry—but there's been two avalanches since you got back, and all the snow the blizzard dropped."

He stared at her column in numbed shock, but she wasn't finished.

"There's about eleven meters of snow above us. I don't know if I can get out. And even if CenSec shows up, I don't know if they'll hear a hail under all this ice. I lost the signals from the surface right after that last avalanche, and the satellite signals are getting too faint to read clearly."

He said the first thing that came into his head, trying to lighten the mood, but without running it past his internal censor first. "Well, at least if I'm going to be frozen into a glacier for all eternity, I've got my love to keep me warm."

He stopped himself, but not in time. *Ob, brilliant. Now she thinks she's locked in an iceberg with a fixated madman!*

"Do—" Her voice sounded choked, probably with shock. "Do you mean that?"

He could have shot himself. "Tia," he began babbling, "it's all right, really, I mean I'm not going to go crazy and try to crack your column or anything, I really am all right, I—"

"Did you mean that?" she persisted.

"I—*Ob, well. It's on the record. You can't make it*

*worse.* "Yes. I don't know, it just sort of—happened." He shrugged helplessly. "It's not anything crazy, like a fixation. But, well—I just don't want any partner of *any* kind but you. If that's love, then I guess I love you. And I really, really love you a lot." He sighed, and rubbed his temples. "So there it is, out in the open at last. I hope I don't offend or frighten you, but you're the best thing that ever happened to me, and that's a fact. I'd rather be with you than anyone else I know, or know of." He managed a faint grin. "Holostars and stellar celebs included."

The plexy cover to Ted Bear's little "shrine" popped open, and Alex jumped.

"I can't touch you, and you can't touch me, but—would you like to hug Theodore?" she replied softly. "I love you, too, Alex. I think I have, ever since you went out to face the Zombie Bug. You're the bravest, cleverest, most wonderful brawn I could ever imagine, and I wouldn't want to be anyone's partner but yours."

The offer of her childhood friend was the closest she could come to intimacy—and he knew it.

He got up, carefully, and took the little fellow down out of his wall-home, hugging the soft little bear once, hard, before he restored him again and closed the door.

"You have a magnificent lady, Theodore Bear," he told the solemn-faced little toy. "And I'm going to do my best to make her happy."

He turned back to her column, and cleared his throat, carefully. Time, and more than time, to change the subject. "Right," he said. "Now that we've both established why we've been touchy—let's see if we can figure out what our options are."

"Options?" she replied, confused.

"Certainly." He raised his chin defiantly. "I intend to spend the rest of my life with you—and I don't intend *that* to be restricted to how long it takes before the pirates find us or we freeze to death! So let's figure out some *options*, hang it all!"

To his great joy and relief, she actually laughed. And if there was an edge of hysteria in it, he chose to ignore that little nuance.

"Right," she said. "Options. Well, we can start with the servos, I guess. . . ."

Tia snuggled down into his arms, and turned into a big blue toy bear. The bear looked at him reproachfully.

He started to get up, but the bedcoverings had turned to snowdrifts, and he was frozen in place. The bear tried to chip him out, but his blunt arms were too soft to make an impression on the ice-covered drifts.

Then he heard rumbling—and looked up, to see an avalanche poised to crash down on him like some kind of slow-motion wave—

The avalanche rumbled; Tia-the-bear growled back, interposing herself between him and the tumbling snow—  
"Alex, wake up!"

He floundered awake, flailing at the bedclothes, hitting the light-button more by accident than anything else. He blinked as the light came up full, blinding him, his legs trapped in a tangle of sheets and blankets. "What?" he said, his tongue too thick for his mouth. "Who? Where?"

"Alex," Tia said, her voice strained but excited. "Alex, I have been trying to get you to wake up for fifteen minutes! There's a CenSec ship Upstairs, and it's beating the tail off those two pirates!"

*CenSec? Spirits of space—*

"What happened?" he asked, grabbing for clothing and pulling it on. "From the beginning—"

"The first I knew of it was when one of the pirates sent a warning down to the ship here to stay under cover and quiet. I got the impression that they thought it was just an ordinary Survey ship, until it locked onto one of them and started blasting." Tia had brought up all of her systems again; fresher air was moving briskly through the ventilator, all the lights and boards were up and active in the main cabin. "That was when all the scans stopped—and I started breaking loose. I ran that freeze-thaw cycle you suggested, and a couple of minutes ago, I fired the engines. I can definitely move, and I'm pretty sure I can pull out of here without too much trouble. I might lose some paint and some bits of things on my surface, but nothing that can't be repaired."

"What about Upstairs?" he asked, running for his chair without stopping for shoes or even socks, and strapping himself down.

"Good news and bad news. The CenSec ship looks like it's going to take both the pirates," she replied. "The bad news is that while I can receive, I can't seem to broadcast. The ice might have jammed something; I can't tell."

"All right; we can move, and the ambush Upstairs is being taken care of." Alex clipped the last of his restraint belts in place; when Tia moved, it could be abruptly, and with little warning. "But if we can't broadcast, we can't warn CenSec that there's another ship down here—we can't even identify ourselves as a friend. And we'll be a sitting duck for the pirates if we try to rise. They can just hide in their blinds and ambush the CenSec ship, then wait to see if we come out of hiding—as soon as we clear their horizon they can pot us."

Alex considered the problem as dispassionately as he could. "Can we stay below their horizon until we're out of range?"

Tia threw up a map as an answer. If the pirate chose to pursue them, there was no way that she could stay out of range of medium guns, and they had to assume that was what the pirate had.

"There has to be a way to keep them on the ground, somehow," Alex muttered, chewing a hangnail, aware that with every second that passed their window of opportunity was closing. "What's going on Upstairs?"

"The first ship is heavily damaged. If I'm reading the tactics right, the CenSec ship is going to move in for the kill—provided the other pirate gives him a chance."

Alex turned his attention back to their own problem. "If we could just cripple them—throw enough rocks down on them or . . . wait a minute. Bring up the views of the building they're hiding in—the ones you got from my camera."

Tia obeyed, and Alex studied the situation carefully, matching pictures with memory. "Interesting thing about

those hills—see how some of them look broken off, as if those tips get too heavy to support after a while? I bet that's because the winds come in from different directions, and scour out under the crests once in a while. Can you give me a better shot of the hills overhanging those buildings?"

"No problem." The viewpoint pulled back, displaying one of those wave-crest hills overshadowing the building with the partial roof. "Alex!" she exclaimed.

"You see it too," he said with satisfaction. "All right, girl, think we can pull this off?"

In answer, she revved her engines. "Be a nice change to hit back, for once!"

"Then let's lift!"

The engines built from a quiet purr to a bone-deep, bass rumble, more felt than heard. Tia pulled in her landing gear, then began rocking herself by engaging null-grav, first on the starboard, then on the port side, each time rolling a little more. Alex did what he could, playing with the attitude jets, trying to undercut some of the ice.

Her nose rose until Alex tilted back in his chair at about a forty-five-degree angle. That was when Tia cut loose with the full power of her rear thrusters.

*"We're moving!"* she shouted over the roar of her own engines, engines normally reserved only for atmosphere flight. There was no sensation of movement, but Alex clearly heard the scrape of ice along her hull and winced, knowing that without a long stint in drydock, Tia would look worse than Hank's old tramp freighter. . . .

Suddenly, they were free.

Tia killed the engines and engaged full null-grav drive, hovering just above the surface of the snow in eerie silence.

"CenSec got the first ship; the other one jumped them. It looks pretty even," Tia said shortly, as Alex heard the whine of the landing gear being dropped again. "So far, no one has noticed us. Are you braced?"

"Go for it," he replied. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Hold on," she said shortly.

She shot skyward, going for altitude. She knew the capabilities of her hull better than Alex did; he was going to leave this in her hands. The hill they wanted was less than a kilometer away; when they'd gotten high enough, Tia nosed over and dove for it. She aimed straight for the crest, as if it were a target and she a projectile.

Sudden fear clutched at his throat, his heart going a million beats per second. *She can't mean to ram—*

Alex froze, his hands clutching the armrests.

At the last minute, Tia rolled her nose up, hitting the crest of the hill with her landing gear instead of her nose.

The shriek and crunch of agonized metal told Alex that they were not going to make port anywhere but a space station now. The impact rammed him back into his chair, the lights flickered and went out, and crash-systems deployed, cushioning him from worse shock. Even so, he blacked out for a moment.

When he came to again, the lights were back on, and Tia hovered, tilted slightly askew, above the alien city.

Below and to their right was what was left of the roof-

less building—now buried beneath a pile of ice, earth, and rock.

"Are you all right?" he managed, though it hurt to move his jaw.

"Spaceworthy," she said, and there was no mistaking the shakiness in her voice. "Barely. I'll be as leaky as a sieve in anything but the main cabin and the passenger section though. And I don't know about my drives—hang on, we're being hailed."

The screen flickered, and filled with the image of Neil, with Chria Chance in the background. "AH One-Oh-Three-Three, is that you? I assume you had a good reason for playing 'chicken' with a mountain?"

"It's us," Alex replied, feeling all of his energy drain out as his adrenaline level dropped to nothing. "There's another one of your playmates under that rockpile."

"Ah," Neil said nothing more; simply nodded. "All right, then. Can you come up to us?"

"We aren't going to be making any landings," Tia pointed out. "But I don't know about the state of our drives."

Chria leaned over her partner's shoulder. "I wouldn't trust them if I were you," she said. "But if you can get up here, we can take you in tow and hold you in orbit until one of the transports shows up. Then you can ride home in their bay."

"It's a deal," Alex told her—then, with a lift of an eyebrow, "I didn't know you could do that."

"There's a lot you don't know," she told him. "Is that all right with you, Tia?"

"At this point, just about anything would be all right with me," she replied. "We're on the way."

Tia was still a little dizzy from the call she'd gotten from the Institute. *When you're refitted, we'd like you to take the first Team in to what we think is the EsKay homeworld. You and Alexander have the most experience in situations where Plague is a possibility of any other courier on contract to us.* It had only made sense; to this day no one knew what had paralyzed her. She had a vested interest in making sure the team stayed healthy, and an even bigger one in helping to find the Bug.

Of course, they knew that. And they knew she would never buy out her contract until *this* assignment was over. Blackmail? Assuredly. But it was a form of blackmail she could live with.

Besides, if her plan worked she would soon be digging with the Prime Team, not just watching them. It might take a while, but sooner or later, she'd have enough money made from her investments—

Once she paid for the repairs, that is. From the remarks of the techs working on her hull, they would not be cheap.

Then Stirling stunned her again, presenting the figures in her account.

"So, my dear lady," said Stirling, "Between an unspecified reward from the Drug Enforcement Arm, the bonus for decoding the purpose of the EsKay navybook, the fine return from your last investment, and the finder's fee for that impressive treasure trove, you are *quite* a wealthy shellperson."

"So I see," Tia replied, more than a little dazed. "But what about the bill for repairs—?"

"Covered by CenSec," Stirling wasn't precisely gloating, but he was certainly enjoying himself. "And if you don't mind my saying so, that was *my* work. I merely repeated what you had told me about the situation—pointed out that your damages were due entirely to a civilian aiding in the apprehension of dangerous criminals—and CenSec seemed positively eager to have the bills transferred over. When I mentioned how you had kept *their* ship from ambush from the ground, they decided you needed that Singularity Drive you've always wanted."

She suspected that he had done more than merely mention it . . . perhaps she ought to see if she could get Lee Stirling as her Advocate, instead of the softperson she had, who had done *nothing* about the repairs or the drive! So, she would not have to spend a single penny of all those bonuses on her own repairs! "What about my investments in the Prosthetics firm? And what if I take my bonus money and plow it back into Moto Prosthetics?"

"Doing brilliantly. And if you do that . . . hmm . . . do you realize you'll have a controlling interest?" Stirling sounded quite amazed. "Is this something you wanted? You *could* buy out your contract with all this. Or get yourself an entire new refit internally and externally."

"Yes," she replied firmly. She was glad that Alex wasn't aboard at the moment, even though she felt achingly lonely without the sounds of his footsteps or his tuneless whistling. This was something she needed absolute privacy for. "In fact, I am going to need a softperson proxy to go to the Board of Directors for me."

"Now?" Stirling asked.

"As soon as I have controlling interest," she replied. "The sooner the better."

*And it can't be soon enough to suit me.*

Alex looked deeply into the bottom of his glass, and decided that this one was going to be his last. He had achieved the state of floating that passed for euphoria; any more, and he would pass it, and become disgustingly drunk. Probably a weepy drunk, too, all things considered. That would be a bad thing; despite his civilian clothing, someone might recognize him as a CS brawn, and that would be trouble. Besides, this was a high-class bar as spaceport bars went; human bartender, subdued, restful lighting, comfortable booths and stools, good music that was not too loud. They didn't need a maudlin drunk; they really didn't need any drunk. No point in ruining other people's evening just because his life was a mess. . . .

He felt the lump in his throat, and knew one more drink would make it spill over into an outpouring of emotion. The bartender leaned over and said, confidingly, "Buddy, if I were you, I'd cut off about now."

Alex nodded, a little surprised, and swallowed back the lump. Had liability laws gotten to the point where bartenders were watching their customers for risky behavior? "Yeah. What I figured." He sniffed a bit, and told himself to straighten up before he became an annoyance.

The bartender—a human, which was why Alex had chosen to drink away his troubles here, if such a thing was possible—did not leave. Instead, he polished the slick pseudo-wooden bar beside Alex with a spotless cloth, and said casually, “If you don’t mind my saying so, buddy, you look like a man with a problem or two.”

Alex laughed mirthlessly. The man had no idea. “Yeah. Guess so.”

“You want to talk about it?” the bartender persisted. “That’s what they hire me for. That’s why you’re paying so much for the drinks.”

Alex squinted up at the man, who was perfectly ordinary in a way that seemed very familiar. Conservative haircut; conservative, casual clothing. Nothing about the face or the expression to mark him except a certain air of friendly concern. It was that “air” that tipped him off—it was very polished, very professional. “Counselor?” he asked, finally.

The bartender nodded to a framed certificate over the three shelves of antique and exotic bottles behind the bar. “Licensed. Confidential. Freelance. Been in the business for five years. You probably can’t tell me anything I haven’t heard a hundred times before.”

Freelance and Confidential meant that whatever Alex told him would stay with him, and would not be reported back to his superiors. Alex was both surprised and unsurprised—the Counselor-attended bars had been gaining in popularity when he had graduated. He just hadn’t known they’d gotten *that* popular. He certainly hadn’t expected to find one out here, at a refit station. People tended to pour out their problems when they’d been drinking; someone back on old Tera had figured out that it might be a good idea to give them someone to talk to who *might* be able to tender some reasonable advice. Now there were more Counselors behind bars than in offices, and a large number of bartenders were going back to school to get Counselor’s licenses.

Suddenly the need to unburden himself to *someone* was too much to withstand. “Ever been in love?” he asked, staring back down at the empty glass, and shoving it back and forth a little between his index fingers.

The bartender took the glass away, and replaced it with a cup of coffee. “Not personally, but I’ve seen a lot of people who are—or think they are.”

“Ah.” Alex transferred his gaze to the cup, which steamed very nicely. “I wouldn’t advise it.”

“Yeah. A lot of them say that. Personal troubles with your significant?” the bartender-cum-Counselor prompted. “Maybe it’s something I can help out with.”

Alex sighed. “Only that I’m in love with someone that— isn’t exactly reachable.” He scratched his head for a moment, trying to think of a way to phrase it without giving too much away. “Our—uh—professions are going to keep us apart, no matter what, and there’s some physical problems too.”

The habit of caution was ingrained too deeply. Freelance Counselor or no, he couldn’t bring himself to tell the whole truth to this man. Not when telling it could lose him access to Tia altogether, if the wrong people heard all this.

“Can’t you change jobs?” the Counselor asked reasonably. “Surely a job isn’t worth putting yourself through misery. From everything I’ve ever seen or heard, it’s better to have a low-paying job that makes you happy than a high-paying one that’s driving you into bars.”

Alex shook his head, sorrowfully. “That won’t help,” he sighed hopelessly. “It’s not just the job, and changing it will only make things worse. Think of us as . . . as a Delphin and a Avithran. She can’t swim, I can’t fly. Completely incompatible lives.”

*And that puts it mildly.*

The Counselor shook his head. “That doesn’t sound promising, my friend. Romeo-and-Juliet romances are all very well for the holos, but they’re hell on your insides. I’d see if I couldn’t shake my emotional attachment, if I was you. No matter how much you think you love someone, you can always turn the heat down if you decide that’s what you want to do about it.”

“I’m trying,” Alex told him, moving the focus of his concentration from the coffee cup to the bartender’s face. “Believe me, I’m *trying*. I’ve got a couple of weeks extended leave coming, and I’m going to use every minute of it in trying. I’ve got dates lined up; I’ve got parties I’m hitting—and a friend from CenSec is planning on taking me on an extended shore-leave crawl.”

The bartender nodded slowly. “I understand, and seeing a lot of attractive new people is one way to try to shake an emotional attachment. But friend—you are not going to find your answer in the bottom of a bottle.”

“Maybe not,” Alex replied sadly, “But at least I can find a little forgetfulness there.”

And as the bartender shook his head, he pushed away from his seat, turned, took a tight grip on his dubious equilibrium, and walked out the door, looking for a little more of that forgetfulness.

Angelica Guon-Stirling bint Chad slid into her leather-upholstered seat and smiled politely at the man seated next to her at the foot of the huge, black-marble table. He nodded back, and returned his attention to the stock market report he was reading on the screen of his datalink. Other men and women, dressed in conservative suits and the subdued hues of management, filed in and took the remaining places around the table. She refrained from chuckling. In a few more moments, he might well be more interested in her than in anything that datalink could supply. She’d gotten entry to the meeting on the pretext of representing her uncle’s firm on some unspecified business—they represented enough fluid wealth that the secretary had added her to the agenda and granted her entry to the sacred boardroom. It was a very well-appointed Sacred Boardroom; rich with the scent of expensive leather and hushed as only a room ringed with high-priced antisurveillance equipment could be. The lights were set at exactly the perfect psychological hue and intensity for the maximum amount of alertness, the chair cradled her with unobtrusive comfort. The colors of warm white, cool black, and gray created an air of efficiency and importance, without being sterile.

None of this intimidated Angelica in the least. She had



seen a hundred such boardrooms in the past, and would probably see a thousand more before her career had advanced to the point that she was too busy to be sent out on such missions. Her uncle had not only chosen her to be Ms. Cade's proxy because they were related; he had chosen her because she was the best proxy in the firm. And this particular venture was going to need a very delicate touch, for what Ms. Cade wanted was not anything the Board of Directors of Moto Prosthetics was going to be ready for. *They* thought in terms of hostile takeovers, poison pills, golden parachutes. Ms. Cade had an entirely different agenda. If this were not handled well and professionally, the board might well fight, and that would waste precious time.

Though it might seem archaic, board meetings still took place in person. It was too easy to fake holos, to create a computer-generated simulacrum of someone who was dead or in cold-sleep. That was why she was here now, with proxy papers in order and properly filed with all the appropriate authorities. Not that she minded. This was exciting work, and every once in a while there was a client like Hypatia Cade, who wanted something so different that it made everything else she had done up to now seem like a training exercise.

The meeting was called to order—and Angelica stood up before the Chairman of the Board could bring up normal business. Now was the time. If she waited until her scheduled turn, she could be lost or buried in nonsense—and as of this moment, the board's business was no longer what had been scheduled anyway. It was hers, Angelica's, to dictate. It was a heady brew, power, and Angelica drank it to the dregs as all eyes centered on her, most affronted that she had "barged in" on their business.

"Gentlemen," she said smoothly, catching all their attentions, "Ladies. I believe you should all check your datalinks. If you do, you will see that my client, a Ms. Hypatia Cade, has just this moment purchased a controlling interest in your preferred stock. As of this moment, Hypatia Cade is Moto Prosthetics. As her proxy, she directs me to put the normal business before the board on hold for a moment."

There was a sudden, shocked moment of silence; then a rustle as cuffs were pushed back, followed by another moment of silence as the members of the board took in the reality of her statement, verified that it was true, wondered how it had happened without them noticing, then waited for the axe to fall. All eyes were on Angelica; some of them desperate. Most of the desperate were those who backed risky ventures within the company, and were wondering if their risk-taking had made them into liabilities for the new majority owner.

*Ah, power. I could disband the entire board and bring in my own people, and you all know it.* These were the moments that she lived for; the feeling of having the steel hand within the velvet glove—knowing that she held immense power, and choosing not to exercise it.

Angelica slid back down into her seat, and smiled—smoothly, coolly, but encouragingly. "Be at ease, ladies and gentlemen. The very first thing that my client wishes

to assure you of is that she intends no shakeups. She is satisfied with the way this company is performing, and she does not intend to interfere in the way you are running it."

Once again, the faces around the table changed. Disbelief in some eyes, calculation in others. Then understanding. It would be business as usual. Nothing would change. These men and women still had *their* lives, *their* power, undisturbed.

She waited for the relief to set in, then pounced; leaning forward, putting her elbows down in the table, and steeping her hands before her. "But I must tell you that this will be the case only so long as Ms. Cade is satisfied. And Ms. Cade *does* have a private agenda for this company."

Another pause, to let the words sink in. She saw the questions behind the eyes—what kind of private agenda? Was it something that this Cade person wanted them to do—or to make? Or was it something else altogether?

"It's something that she wants you to construct; nothing you are not already capable of carrying off," Angelica continued, relishing every moment. "In fact, I would venture to say that it is something you *could* be doing now, if you had the inclination. It's just a little personal project, shall we say. . . ."

Alex's mouth tasted like an old rug; his eyes were scratchy and puffed, and his head pounded. Every joint ached, his stomach churned unhappily, and he was not at all enjoying the way the room had a tendency to roll whenever he moved.

The wages of sin were counted out in hangovers, and this one was one of monumental proportions.

*Well, that's what happens when you go on a two-week drunk.*

He closed his eyes, but that didn't help. It hadn't exactly been a two-week drunk, but he had never once in the entire span been precisely sober. He had chosen, quite successfully, to glaze his problems over with the fuzz and blurring of alcohol.

It was *all* that had happened. He had not shaken his fixation with Tia. He was just as hopelessly in love with her as he had been before he started his binge. And he had tried everything short of brain-wipe to get rid of the emotion; he'd made contact with some of his old classmates, he'd gone along with Neil and Chria on a celebratory spree, he'd talked to more bartender-Counselors, he'd picked up girl after girl. . . .

To no avail whatsoever.

Tia Cade it was who was lodged so completely in his mind and heart, and Tia Cade it would remain.

So, besides being hung over, he was still torn up inside. And without that blur of alcohol to take the edge off it, his pain was just as bad as before.

There was only one thing for it; he and Tia would have to work it all out, somehow. One way or another.

He opened his eyes again; his tiny rented cubicle spun slowly around, and he groaned as his stomach protested.

First things first; deal with the hangover. . . .

It was just past the end of the second shift when he made his way down the docks to the refit berth where CenSec had installed Tia for her repair work. It had taken that long before he felt like a human being again. One thing was certain; that was *not* something he intended to indulge in ever again. One long binge in his life was enough.

*I just hope I haven't fried too many brain cells with stupidity. I don't have any to spare.*

He found the lock closed, but there were no more workers swarming about, either inside the bay or out. That was a good sign, since it probably meant all the repairs were over. He'd used the day-and-night noise as an excuse to get away, assuming Tia would contact him if she needed to.

As he hit the lock controls and gave them his palm to read, it suddenly occurred to him that she hadn't made any attempt at all to contact him in all the time he'd been gone.

Had he frightened her?

Had she reported him?

The lock cycled quickly, and he stepped onto a ship that was uncannily silent.

The lights had been dimmed down; the only sounds were of the ventilation system. Tia did not greet him; nothing did. He might as well have been on an empty, untenanted ship, without even an AI.

Something was wrong.

His heart pounding, his mouth dry with apprehension, he went to the main cabin. The boards were all dark, with no signs of activity.

Tia wasn't sulking; Tia didn't sulk. There was nothing functioning that could not be handled by the stand-alone redundant micros.

He dropped his bag on the deck, from fingers that had gone suddenly nerveless.

There could be only one cause for this silence, this absence of activity. Tia was gone.

Either the BB authorities had found out about how he felt, or Tia herself had complained. They had come and taken her away, and he would never see or talk to her again.

As if to confirm his worst fears, a glint of light on an open plexy window caught his eye. Theodore Edward Bear was gone, his tiny shrine empty.

No—

But the evidence was inescapable.

Numb with shock, he found himself walking toward his own cabin. Perhaps there would be a note there, in his personal database. Perhaps there would be a message waiting from CS, ordering him to report for official Counseling.

Perhaps both. It didn't matter. Tia was gone, and very little mattered any more.

Black despair washed into him, a despair so deep that not even tears would relieve it. Tia was gone. . . .

He opened the door to his cabin, and the light from the corridor shone inside, making the person sitting on his bunk blink.

*Person sitting on my—*

Female. It was definitely female. And she wasn't wearing anything like a CS uniform, Counselor, Advocate, or anything else. In fact, she wasn't wearing very much at all—a little neon-red Skandex unitard that left nothing to imagine.

He turned on the light, an automatic reflex. His visitor stared up at him, lips creasing in a shy smile. She was tiny, smaller than he had first thought; dark and elfin, with big, blue eyes, the image of a Victorian fairy—and oddly familiar.

In her hands, she gently cradled the missing Ted Bear. It was the bear that suddenly shook his brain out of inactive and into overdrive.

He stared; he gripped the side of the door. "T-T-Tia?" he stammered.

She smiled again, with less shyness. "Hi," she said—and it was Tia's voice, sounding a bit . . . odd . . . coming from a mouth and not a speaker. "I'm sorry I had to shut so much down. I can't run *this* and the ship too."

It was Tia—*Tia!*—sitting there in a body, a human body, like the realization of his dream!

"This?" he replied cleverly.

"I hope you don't mind if I don't get up," she continued, a little ruefully. "I'm not very good at walking yet." They just delivered this today, and I haven't had much practice in it yet."

"It?" he said, sitting heavily down on his bunk, and staring at her. "How—what—"

"Do you like it?" she asked, pathetically eager for his approval. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to approve of—the body?

"How could I *not* like it—you—" His head was spinning as badly as it had a few hours ago. "Tia, what on earth *is* this?"

She blinked, and giggled. "I keep forgetting. You know all that bonus money we've been getting? I kept investing it, then reinvesting the profits in Moto Prosthetics. But when we got back here, I was thinking about something Doctor Kenny told me, that they had the capability to make a body like this, but that there was no way to put a naked brain in it, and there was so *much* data transfer needed to run it that the link could only be done at very short distances."

"Oh." He couldn't help but stare at her; this was his dream, his daydream, his—

Never mind.

"Anyway," she continued, blithely unaware that she had stunned him into complete silence, "it seemed to me that the body would be perfect for a brainship. I mean, we've got all the links already, and it wouldn't be any harder to control a body from inside than a servo. But he was already an investor, and he told me it wasn't likely they'd ever build a body like that, since there was no market for it, because it would cost as much as a brainship contract-buyout."

"But how—"

She laughed aloud. "That was why I took all my share of the bonuses and bought more stock! I bought a controlling interest, then I told them to build me a body! I

don't need a buyout—I don't really want a buyout—not since the Institute decided to give us the EsKay homework assignment."

He shook his head. "That simple? It hardly seems possible . . . didn't they argue?"

"They were too happy that I was letting them keep their old jobs," she told him cynically. "After all, as controlling stockholder, I had the right to fire them all and set up my own Board of Directors. But I have to tell you the funniest thing!"

"What's that?" he asked.

Her hands caressed Theodore's soft fur. "Word of what I was doing leaked out, and now there is a market! Did you have any idea how many shellpersons there are who've earned a buyout, but didn't have any place to go with it, because they were happy with their current jobs?"

He shook his head dumbly.

"Not too many ships," she told him, "but a lot of shellpersons running installations. Lots of them. And there were a lot of inquiries from brainships, too—some of them saying that they'd be willing to skip a buyout to have a body! Moto Prosthetics even got a letter of protest from some of the Advocates!"

"Why?" he asked, bewildered. "Why on earth would they care?"

"They said that we were the tools of the BB program, that we had purposely put this 'mechanical monster' together to tempt brainships out of their buyout money." She tilted her head to one side, charmingly, and frowned. "I must admit that angle had never occurred to me. I hope that really isn't a problem. Maybe I should have Lars and Lee Stirling look into it for me."

"Tia," he managed, around the daze surrounding his thoughts, "what is this 'mechanical monster' of yours?"

"It's a cybernetic body, with a wide-band comlink in the extreme shortwave area up here." She tapped her forehead. "What's different about it is that it's using shellperson tech to give me full sensory input from the skin as well as output to the rest. My range isn't much outside the ship, but my techs at Moto are working on that. After all, when we take the Prime Team out to the EsKay homeworld, I'm going to want to join the dig, if they'll let me. What with alloys and silicates and carbon fibers and all, it's not much heavier than you are, even though it outmasses a softperson female of this type by a few kilos. *Everything* works, though; full sensory and, well . . . everything. Like a softperson again, except that I don't get muscle fatigue and I can shut off the pain sensors if I'm damaged. That was why I took Ted out; I wanted to feel him, to hug him again."

She just sat there and beamed at him, and he shook his head. "But why?" he asked, finally.

She blinked, and then dropped her eyes to the bear. "I . . . probably would have gone for a buyout, if it hadn't been for you," she said shyly. "Or maybe a Singularity Drive, except that CenSec decided that maybe

they'd better give me one, and threw it in with the repairs. But—I told you, Alex. You're the most special person in my life. How could I know this was possible, and *not* do it for—for both of us?"

He dared to touch her then, just one finger along her cheek, then under her chin, raising her eyes to meet his. There was nothing about those lucent eyes that looked mechanical or cold; nothing about the warmth and resiliency of the skin under his hand that said "cybernetic."

"You gave up your chance of a buyout for me—for us?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Someone very wise once said that the chance for happiness was worth giving up a little freedom for. And really, between the Advocates and everybody, they really can't *make* us do anything we don't want to."

"I guess not." He smiled, and she smiled back. "You do realize that you've actually done the BB program two favors, don't you?"

"I have?" She blinked again, clearly bewildered.

"You've given shellpersons something *else* to do with their buyout money. If they don't have Singularity Drives, they'll want those first—and *then* they'll want one of these." He let go of her chin and tapped her cheek playfully. "Maybe more than one. Maybe one of each sex, or in different body types. Some brainships may never buy out. But the other problem—you've solved fixation, my clever lady."

She nodded after a moment. "I never thought of that. But you're right! If you have a *body*, someone to be with and . . . ah . . . everything, you won't endanger the shellperson. And if it's just and infatuation based on the dream instead of the reality, well . . ."

"Well, after a few rounds with the body, it will cool off to something manageable." He chuckled. "Watch out, or they'll give you a bonus for that one tool!"

She laughed. "Well, I won't take it as a buyout! Maybe I'll just build myself a second body! After all, if we aren't going to be exploring the universe like a couple of holo-heroes, we have the time to explore things a little . . . closer to hand. Right?"

She posed coyly, looking at him flirtatiously over her shoulder. He wondered how many of her entertainment holos she'd watched to find *that* pose. "So, what would you like, Alex? A big, blonde Valkyrie? An Egyptian queen? A Nubian warrior-maid? How about a Chinese princess, or—"

"Let's learn about what we have at hand, shall we," he interrupted, sliding closer to her and taking her in his arms. Her head tilted up toward his, her eyes shining with anticipation. Carefully, gently, he took the bear out of her hands and placed him on the shelf above the foot of the bed, as her arms slid around his waist, cautiously but eagerly.

"Now," he breathed, "about that exploration . . ."

THE END

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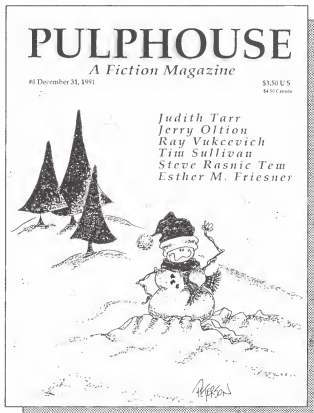
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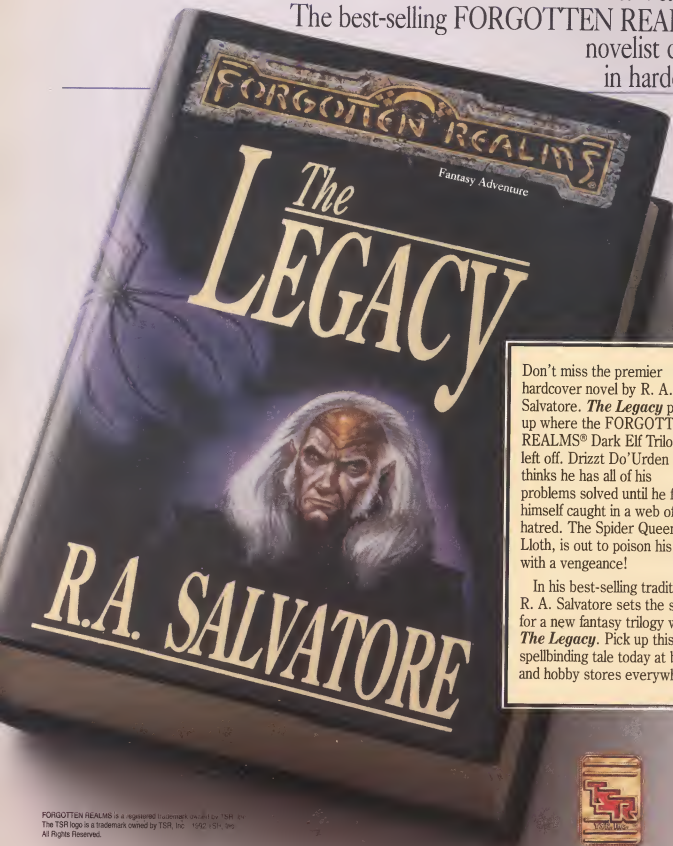
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